

## More than veggies harvested at school gardens

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 STAFF WRITER

On a recent sunny morning at Stepney Elementary School in Monroe, first-graders were up to their elbows in dirt.

"Planting is my favorite thing," said Melissa Davila, 6, setting a tomato seedling into a raised bed in the school courtyard. "You get to see worms and stuff."

"You have to break the roots apart," offered Josh Kimball, 7, watching a classmate extract a plant from its pot and place it into a 6-inch trench.

"I like to see how they grow," added Emily Simpkins, 7, acknowledging the rosemary plant she held was too strong for her taste. Basil is more to her liking.

Before the class left, the youngsters gathered in the courtyard's newly completed reading corner to discuss the purpose of plant roots and whether they might have the makings for a great salad by the time they returned to school in the fall.

"I kind of view it as an outdoor classroom," said Susan Austin, the school principal, who started the garden several years ago with the help of donations.

At the time, she didn't realize she was part of a "growing" trend.

What started as an effort to get children outdoors and eating more nutritious foods is gaining momentum, said Leslie Alexander, coordinator of the University of Connecticut's Master Garden Education Program.

Driven in part by a desire to save with homegrown produce and partly by the vegetable garden that Michelle Obama planted at the White House, interest has jumped in creating elementary and middle school gardens — and making them

part of the curriculum.

Alexander, who has fielded requests from numerous schools and PTA groups, is working with Jane Slupecki of the state Department of Agriculture to try and develop a survey to determine just how much interest there is in gardening at school. They also run classes on how to start and sustain gardens just about anywhere.

At Read School in Bridgeport, a garden has taken shape in recycled oil drums that were painted and placed alongside of the school on a recent Saturday. Principal Sandra McLeod calls it an urban garden and said the idea is to teach students they can plant a garden at home even if they don't have a backyard.

The sixth-graders, as part of their science class, are in charge of tending the flowers, chives, tomatoes and even a fig tree until the end of the school year. Students in the summer Lighthouse program will then take over the watering chores.

"Part of it is wanting to be close to and give back to the land. Part of it is wanting children to know where food is coming from and eating healthier," Slupecki said about the trend.

"Kids think it will happen tomorrow and it doesn't," Tara Smiley, a second-grade teacher at Black Rock School in Bridgeport, said of students' expectations for the garden's yield.

The school's after-school garden club began as a way for kids to get outside and get their hands dirty. More and more, the effort is becoming an accepted part of the curriculum, said Smiley. Beyond planting and growing, students learn the connection between trees and the air they breathe, and the resources

that come from the earth.

In three years, the club has become so popular its enrollment is limited to upper-classmen and their siblings. Beyond bulbs, rose and lilac bushes and a few trees, the club has started a small vegetable garden of beans and tomatoes. Donations and money from a Mother's Day plant sale will help the club buy a worm composter.

"My goal is to get the vegetables we grow into the lunchroom," said Smiley.

At Unquowa School in Fairfield, gardening is one piece of a sustainability program that has been nurtured for several years by Headmaster Sharon Lauer. Between a small garden on school property and a partnership with an organic farm up the road, Unquowa weaves gardening into the science curriculum to make sure students know how food is grown and how it affects health and ecology, said Lauer.

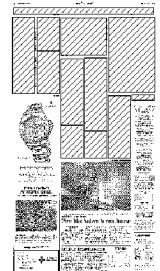
"Plus, I just think that learning to grow things feeds your soul," she said.

The school grows herbs, tomatoes, lettuce, potatoes and radishes, and has a lavender hedge that surrounds a butterfly garden.

Lavender flowers are harvested for use in shortbread served in the lunchroom. During the summer, the Unquowa gardens are weeded and watered by a Summer Farm Camp run by the school.

At Eli Whitney School in Stratford, second-graders and their families take turns during the summer watering and weeding the garden the class plants each May.

A class project, the garden includes vegetables, melons and pumpkins, according to Tami Bruno, a



second-grade teacher at Whitney. In the fall, the new second-graders take over and clean out the garden after the first frost.

At Stepney School, Austin and the school custodian take care of those tasks once a day camp lets out for the summer.

Austin said the courtyard garden grows every year. Beyond a perennial garden, fish pond, grape vine trellis and walkway made of geometric shapes, the latest addition is a reading corner patio donated by Gault Stone of Westport and installed by Craig Kopfmann, a Stepney parent and owner of Green Acres, a Monroe garden center.

"I think five classes came out here yesterday to use this corner for reading or writing," said Austin.

The garden also helps underscore scientific principles at every grade level. Kindergartners help tend a small fish pond in the garden. First-graders do the vegetable planting. Second-graders study the benefit of worms in the soil. Third-graders learn about rocks and minerals by tending the rock garden. Fourth-graders look after a terrarium filled with anoles, or lizards.

By fall, when there is a bounty of herbs and vegetables to harvest, some of the crops make their way to the school lunchroom, some will be donated to a local food pantry, and at least a few large purple eggplants will be baked into a mean eggplant parmigiana that Austin is famous for making her staff.



PHIL NOEL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Josh Kimball, 7, a first-grade student at Stepney Elementary School in Monroe, checks the sweet corn he is going to plant in the school garden.**



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**Emily Simpkins, 7, right, a first-grade student at Stepney Elementary School in Monroe, plants rosemary in the school garden.**