

LESSON 8

Gardens in the Wellness Movement

The reauthorization of the 2004 Child Nutrition Act included a provision that requires each educational agency participating in a federal school meal program to establish a local school wellness policy. By law, the policy must set goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities that promote student wellness; establish food guidelines for all foods available on campus; involve a variety of stakeholders in the policy development; and establish a plan for measuring the effects of the policy. With a national obesity epidemic and nearly 1 in 3 school-aged children overweight or obese in SD County, wellness policies and other efforts to help instill healthy habits in children are vital to creating a healthier future. School gardening programs can help schools meet wellness goals by promoting healthy nutrition and physical activity. Gardens are a source of fresh healthy food and promote food literacy and an understanding of how food gets from farm to fork, and meaningful physical activity. These are all important lessons if we hope to reduce the obesity rate. In this lesson, we'll focus specifically on connecting the gardening program to the cafeteria and using the garden to promote larger farm-to-school efforts.

Learning Objectives

1. Know the approval process and basic implementation strategies for incorporating garden produce in the cafeteria.
2. Understand how to compost cafeteria waste for the garden.
3. Learn ideas for celebration that promotes the garden and healthy eating.
4. Understand benefits of Farm-to-School and how the garden can promote it.

Using Garden Produce in the Cafeteria

The school cafeteria is a classroom itself for teaching students the benefits and joy of life-long healthy eating habits. Research has shown that students that grow their own food are more likely to eat the food they helped grow, and they also tend to be more adventurous and healthier in other food choices (U Colorado 2009). Using and promoting school garden produce in the cafeteria can be a valuable teaching tool, even if the amount of produce available can only be a supplement to the other food.

School cafeterias face many challenges providing students with fresh and healthy foods. These include: low meal budgets, tight USDA-based nutrition guidelines, cost-saving kitchens equipped only for reheating frozen foods, and untrained staff. When considering a garden-to-cafeteria program you'll need to acknowledge these challenges directly, and work with the cafeteria staff closely to hear their ideas and concerns. Staff in many instances are major advocates of the program, and they are essential to making it work, so it's vital that at least one representative of the food service staff sit on the garden leadership team. Depending on budget, the food program might even support the garden by purchasing produce from the garden, plant seeds and starts for the garden, or supplies for the garden and/or garden to cafeteria program.

The next two subsections discuss two key considerations for a creating a garden-to-cafeteria program: (1) permission and regulations for using the produce, and (2) how to use the produce.

1. **Permission:** It is permissible to use garden-grown produce in cafeterias and retail outlets, including school cafeterias. Federal law does not specifically speak to the use of garden-grown produce, but a 2009 memo from the USDA does point out that school food services may permit the use of school garden-grown produce in the cafeteria. At the state level, the California Retail Food Code governs food service practices. While the code doesn't speak to the subject directly there are no disallowances of garden-grown produce. In an effort to help clarify uses of garden-grown produce in regulated food facilities and promote safe food handling practices, the County of San Diego Department of Environmental Health released its Conditional Approval of a Culinary Garden Food Source for a Regulated Food Facility in 2011 (see Appendix 5). Shortly thereafter





in 2012, San Diego Unified School District launched its Conditional Approval of a Food Source for SDUSD's Garden-to-Cafeteria Program. For a great summary of the relevant laws please see and share NPLAN's publication "Serving School Garden Produce in the Cafeteria" (available here: www.nplanonline.org/childhood-obesity/products/school-garden-produce). Talk with food service staff and school administrators to make sure they are all aware of the permissions, and so everyone is on the same page about wanting the program to happen. As with any food used in the cafeteria, food safety protocol must be followed very carefully, including for washing and preparation. You can find several great resources to support your case for Garden to Cafeteria on the Farm to School web site (www.farmtoschool.org/CO/pubs.htm) and San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative web site (www.ourcommunityourkids.org/domains--committees/schools-and-after-school/healthy-works-school-gardens.aspx).

- 2 **How to use produce:** Herbs are a good, simple way to start; they are quick and easy to grow and can be incorporated into lots of recipes, if the kitchen is set up for cooking. The salad bar is also great; student growers can promote their garden-grown veggies to their peers at the salad bar, as occurs in the San Diego Unified School District, and small amounts can easily be used to supplement the bar. Support classroom projects by planning harvest-of-the-month activities, and cooking and/or tasting lessons. These lessons can easily coincide with the school food services menu when garden-grown produce or local foods are served, and students can work with food service staff to plan plantings to work for recipes. Some sites have adopted the model of mobile cooking carts to provide teachers with easy access to the tools to conduct a tasting. You can find some good information about a cooking cart system in the Vista Unified School District at: <http://www.vusd.k12.ca.us/cns/teachresoures.htm>.

ACTIVITY 1

Brainstorm and share ways that garden produce might be incorporated, however small the amounts, into breakfast, lunch, and snack. Design ways to promote that produce to the school community.

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Composting Kitchen Waste for the Garden

Composting is a great opportunity for food services to support and benefit from the garden. Data from pilot waste reduction projects show great success of school composting (Cal EPA 2002). Composting waste from the food program engages the whole school community in supporting the garden (by providing it with nutrients from leftovers) and reduces costs for hauling food waste off the site. When done systematically, it provides a needed soil amendment to the garden from food and paper waste generated on site. Food services can provide receptacles for food waste and students can create a well-labeled system for helping staff and fellow students collect waste at the end of each meal (this would make an excellent class project for older students!). The garden team can then coordinate with classes and after-school staff to incorporate routine composting time/activities. For basics on composting, Gardening 101 and "Building Fertile Soil" (casfs.ucsc.edu/publications/for-the-gardener) offer good resources. For information on waste audits and institutionalized waste reduction use this link from CalRecycle: www.calrecycle.ca.gov/ReduceWaste/Schools/composition.htm

Celebrations for Promoting the Garden and Healthy Eating

Food- and garden-related celebrations help involve food service workers, build community, fundraise, promote other healthy food initiatives like Farm-to-School and reward the organizers and student growers for their hard work! Again, the school garden typically won't produce enough food to source large amounts of food to school meal programs, so celebratory events are a good way to use garden produce in a visible and positive way.

Seasons and seasonal garden harvests are natural ways to organize garden events and celebrations. You could schedule an annual fall harvest festival where food service workers help students prepare a squash dish for their families and classmates. New families would get to meet food service workers, bridging a gap in garden participants that is often left open.

Any garden celebration is an opportunity to praise and thank the people who grow the food (students, teachers, community members), the people who cook the food (food service workers), and the people who provide the infrastructure for the program (administration, maintenance, etc). Make sure to always take photos at events like these – photos like this are essential additions to fundraising and grant requests.

How the School Garden Can Promote Farm-to-School

The Farm-to-School movement uses local, fresh foods in school meal programs to support student health, the environment, and the local economy. Local foods provide an alternative to highly-processed foods and keep local farmers farming on their land. Garden-grown produce is the most local of food sources, and a key component of the farm-to-school movement, but local farms can provide more food to really change what students are eating at school. As a part of a successful Farm-to-School program, whenever fresh foods are sampled and served, acknowledging the growers (farmers or the students themselves) will help instill pride in the local producers and help students make a connection between the people who grew their food and the food itself. Student growers will help promote the school-grown food, but beyond this, using garden produce in the cafeteria helps the whole community respect the role that growers play in the food system, which can build support for buying local food for the cafeteria.

Again, celebratory events can be key in promoting and acknowledging what local growers do for creating a healthy population. Celebratory events could incorporate school garden food as well as food from a local grower. A local grower might even come to the event, modeling farming as a possible career choice and connecting families to their local farmers. Think creatively about how the school garden can be a family-based outdoor classroom- one where families can learn about the food in their local community and the food system, and learn how to model at home the healthy food lessons being taught at school.

References

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