

School Pesticide Monitor

A Bi-monthly Bulletin on Pesticides and Alternatives

Vol. 5 No. 2 March/April 2005

Beyond Pesticides / National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides
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The Organic School Garden

Hands-On Teaching of Environmental Health Values

At *Beyond Pesticides'* 22nd National Pesticide Forum, held in April 2004, forum participants had the opportunity to visit several of Berkeley, California's organic school gardens. Beebo Turman, project director at Berkeley Community Garden Collaborative (BCGC), led the tour. The following is a portrayal of the school gardens that were toured, *The Edible Schoolyard* and the *Willard Greening Project*.

The Edible Schoolyard: A model for the country. Overlooking the San Francisco Bay and Golden Gate bridge, a one-acre organic garden rests on the campus of Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, CA. The soil is bursting with fresh produce, herbs, vines, berries and flowers, all surrounded by fruit trees. A compost area, chicken coop, wood fired oven, and picnic tables all add to the vitality and richness of the *Edible Schoolyard*.

Ten years ago, this haven for vegetables, wildlife and students was an asphalt parking lot. In 1995, an idea for a school garden was born and transformed into reality through outreach with landscape architects, chefs, gardeners, teachers, and other design professionals. Now, in 2005 the garden provides an invaluable resource for students, staff and the entire community.

The *Edible Schoolyard* teaches students the fundamental lesson of "seed to table." This lesson creates a bond between students and the natural world. Students start with seeds and work in the soil, composting, caring for plants, learning to respect ecosystems, and learning the dangers of chemicals and pesticides and the benefits of keeping the garden naturally healthy from detrimental insects.

"Seeds" are transformed into lessons of the

"table" through cooking classes incorporated with student electives and humanities curriculum. Students learn about a diversity of plants and foods, growing food from other cultures and cooking international cuisine. They prepare menus, cook and taste, set tables and bring in fresh flowers from the garden. They share in food, conversation and cleanup, composting scraps from their meal to help their own garden grow.

The Willard Greening Project: Facing challenges head on. The *Willard Greening Project* at the Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD) was begun by PTA member Yolanda Huang, and has provided immeasurable benefits to the school and surrounding community. Unfortunately, in June 2004, Americorps, a principal sponsor of *Willard Greening*, pulled its funding due to what many *Willard Greening* advocates say is the faulty accounting methods of BUSD. Since then, the garden has been struggling. Ms. Huang and others in the community are putting up a fight for its survival. During the *Beyond Pesticides* tour in April 2004, tour participants witnessed the garden's beauty and invaluable benefits that they are trying so hard to maintain today.

Before *Willard Greening*, the soil on the school property was abysmal, unable to support any life. As the land was repaired with healthy soil and compost, and beautified with a plethora of plants and crops, a community came together. Students were excited. So were residents. The change that occurred was immense.

Students learned about composting, rotating crops, proper watering and irrigation, how cover crops work, and other principles that exemplify and instill the fact that chemicals are not necessary to grow healthy food.



Willard Greening's nutrition class has been monumental in student's understanding of food in culture. Students learn to read labels and decipher a healthful food choice from an unhealthful one, and the difference between whole foods and processed foods. *Willard Greening* head gardener Matt Tseng commented, "We've seen that the kids are more open in that they try things they never would have tried. The question is whether they make the change in their daily lives. That's a lot harder because we're up against how all of society eats, and the fast food lifestyle."

Willard Greening has been a doorway for students to live healthier lives. The challenge of confronting the societal value of convenience and the promotion of processed and fast food is a daunting one. However, teaching young, developing minds about healthy alternatives hands-on, and letting them actually *feel* the difference, is a vital step toward a deeper cultural understanding of the importance of whole, healthful foods that do not depend on chemicals in their production and processing.

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How to Start An Organic School Garden in Your Community

Many lessons can be learned from the creation of the *Edible Schoolyard* and the *Willard Greening Project* about how to start an organic school garden and thoughtfully incorporate the garden into student life. Following are some tips to assist you in this rewarding endeavor. In addition, a helpful resource can be found at www.edibleschoolyard.org.

Getting Started

- Reach out to the public for support. A school garden can appeal to an eclectic mix of the community, including local environmental groups, organic advocates (find some at your local organic store), gardening clubs, cooking clubs, and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA).
- School garden advocates should hold a meeting with school administrators and landscape architects, chefs, and designers.
- Custodial staff may have concerns about the garden and kitchen proposal. Be understanding and work together to create a solution.

Creating the Garden

- Create a space where the class will meet at the beginning and end of each gardening session.
- Make the garden organic and naturally sustainable. Consider your locale's native flora, fauna and grass species, and climate in deciding which plants to grow throughout the year.
- Leave room in the soil for flowers, as these will add a sense of beauty to the entire space.
- Treat the land as a whole garden for the entire school, instead of dividing it up into sections for each class.

Working with Students

- Begin classes with a greeting ritual.
- Set boundaries so that students will know where they are allowed to go.
- Engage students in hands-on applications for a memorable learning experience – not just pencil and paper exercises.
- Construct lessons so that students can work together in small groups.
- Trust the students in designing and planting.

- Highlight a multi-cultural approach in raising foods and planning menus. Focusing on new, international experiences is a great learning technique that can complement other classes students are taking.
- Incorporate a cooking element to the curriculum so that students can cook the food they grow. Introduce each class session with ingredients and methods, and encourage tasting throughout.
- Have students set a table, with plates and utensils and perhaps a floral centerpiece from the garden. After the meal, engage students in designated cleanup jobs.
- Define set times for cleanup.

Teacher Collaboration

- There should be both full-time garden and kitchen teachers.
- Teachers and the garden and kitchen staff should meet regularly to discuss curriculum development and integration.
- Use blocks of time of 90 minutes or longer for the most successful and intensive garden and kitchen experiences.

Community Outreach and Fundraising

- Hold community-wide events in the garden: show a film, have a bake sale. Hand out fliers or pamphlets on the benefits of the garden to the entire community. Students can help create the materials with research and artwork.
- Community awareness cultivates support in people, organizations and local businesses that would like to become involved, donate supplies or funds, or volunteer their time.
- There are local, state and national grants available. Seek out those that concentrate on environmental programs, science education, gardens and habitats.
- The *Edible Schoolyard* and the *Willard Greening Project* both receive funding from the California Nutrition Network, a state agency whose funding is principally from contributions from state and local governments that qualify for the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Food Stamp Program. Check out similar programs in your state.
- Contact Beyond Pesticides for more ideas on school garden grants.