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How Does Your Garden Grow?

With a lot of tender-loving care from young students at Washington Montessori School

by Linda Jarrett

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November 16, 2011

Kale, Swiss chard, broccoli and radishes are not the first foods that come to mind when preparing a child's meal. But at the Washington Montessori School in the Central West End, students are well acquainted with nutritional foods nurtured and plucked from their very own garden.

The garden is the inspiration of Webster Groves' Charlet Cochran, a member of Second Presbyterian Church, 4501 Westminster Place. The church is sponsoring the garden.

Cochran gained her experience while teaching kindergarten at Bristol Elementary in the Webster Groves School District. She retired in 2009. One of her goals at Bristol was to connect students with nature. A popular project was a perennial and vegetable garden planted outside of her classroom window.



From left, Charlet Cochran with Zakiyah Howard and Desirea Sanders tending to the garden at Washington Montessori School. photo by Diana Linsley (click for larger version)

At the end of the growing season, not only would students develop a taste for veggies, but they showed excitement for the entire process — from planting to harvesting.

"They read about gardening, they wrote about their experiences in the garden, sketched pictures of the different plants and how they changed over time, and they heard the sounds of the garden," she said. "So I integrated every area of the curriculum into that garden. It all had to do with science."

After retirement in 2009, Cochran began tutoring at Washington Montessori School, located at Page and Euclid avenues. Again, she saw the need for a student garden.



The Center for Hope Community and School Garden behind Washington Montessori School. photo by Diana Linsley (click for larger version)

"The main reason that I was interested in getting this garden going for the kids is that they have no time or place be around nature," she said. "An important part of their childhood development is missing when they don't get outdoors. It's as important to their mental, as well as physical health, to encounter nature in different kinds of ways. And they need to know that good food provides good nutrition, which they need."

A garden already existed behind the school, but was in need of much TLC. With help from Gateway Greening, a not-for-profit that builds urban community gardens, Cochran and her husband, Don, a parish associate at Second Presbyterian and church volunteers, the garden began to take shape.

Webster Groves Presbyterian Church, where Don retired as associate pastor, also helped the cause with a donation of \$5,000 for a water hydrant for the garden.

The Center for Hope Community and School Garden was born in the spring of

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2010 when volunteers planted crops for the children to harvest on their return to school in the fall.

Now, children in grades one through five spend time in the garden twice a week. They plant, weed, learn about the process of growing food and gain practical knowledge about the importance of nutrition in their lives.

They had their first hands-on experience in fall of 2010 when they planted lettuce, spinach, radishes and carrots. Last spring, they planted kale, collards, broccoli, cauliflower, tomatoes and potatoes, which they are now harvesting.

"They are getting an appreciation of our earth and how to take care of it – even for the critters that live in the garden," Cochran said.

"Last year I did a lesson on ladybugs. Each child had a couple that they could observe in a baggie. They sketched them and learned about them through reading," she said. "Then we released them into the garden so from time to time we find ladybugs and wonder if they are the babies of the ones we let go."

Another time, caterpillars were making dinner out of the dill.

"The children were so excited," Cochran said. "One class took them back to their room and fed them until they turned into a chrysalis. They kept them all winter and last spring out came a butterfly, followed by two more the next day."

As part of a project to keep students busy and involved during the winter, Cochran got worm bins.

"The kids collected food waste from the cafeteria and tossed it in the bin with the worms and they kept a record of how much they fed them," she said. "In the spring, we collected worm..." she paused for the right word... "excrement. We put it in the garden."

Students showed their enthusiasm at a recent garden visit.

"I like planting the seeds and I like trying different foods," said 7-year-old Arianna Ferguson. "The garden is a place you might like to go."

Third-grader Alesha Hendley said her favorite part is getting potatoes, lettuce and radishes.

"I like it when we drew pictures of flowers and other plants," she said. "I like harvesting the lettuce, carrots and beets."

Charles Nelson, 6, pulled up beets and described using the garden fork and hands to dig up potatoes.

"They were growing under the ground," he said.

Last week, students dug up sweet potatoes, which they had planted in the spring. On Monday, Nov. 14, Jim Voss, head chef at Duff's Restaurant in the Central West End, visited the school and showed students how to prepare his recipe for sweet potato corn bread pudding, a dish he created while working as chef for the Grateful Dead.

Voss got involved with the school garden through Cochran, who came into Duff's quite a bit.

"I think it's great for the kids in the city to get



From left, with newly picked radishes: Arianna Ferguson, Alesha Hendley and Charles Nelson. photo by Diana Linsley (click for larger version)



From left: Charlet Cochran, Olivia Matthews, Aunikka Johnson and Isaiah Payne work in the garden. photo by Diana Linsley (click for larger version)



Fresh produce from the garden. photo by Diana Linsley (click for larger version)



to see the garden as it grows," Voss said. "Most of the food available to them is junk or fast food, and it's great to show the kids what's out there."

Chef Jim Voss with his sweet potato corn bread pudding. photo by Diana Linsley (click for larger version)

Duff's Restaurant Sweet Potato Corn Bread Pudding

Serves 8

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Place four cups peeled and diced sweet potatoes in a small pot, cover with water, bring to a boil and boil until soft, then drain.

Whisk together:

4 eggs

2 c. heavy cream

¼ c. maple syrup

Crumble four cups day-old bread into a bowl. Pour cream mixture over and let soak 15 minutes. Mix in sweet potatoes.

Sauté in one tablespoon of butter:

½ c. diced yellow onion

¼ c. diced celery

½ c. chopped pecans

1 tsp. chopped garlic

1 tsp. fresh thyme

½ tsp. chopped fresh sage

½ tsp. chopped fresh rosemary

Cook until onions are soft, then add:

1 tbsp. chopped fresh parsley

½ tbsp. kosher salt

Fresh cracked black pepper

Mix onion mixture into sweet potatoes. Place all in a two quart casserole dish, and cover with foil. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes. Remove foil and bake another 15 minutes.

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