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Youth gardens have appetite for healthy eating

By Laura Glenn, Free Press correspondent

You may have noticed that school gardens are popping up everywhere in Vermont. There is a movement to reintroduce our children to unprocessed, healthy food that started more than a decade ago with food activist Alice Waters and is gaining momentum with support from first lady Michelle Obama.

[A local garden is one of the best ways](#) to get kids to learn about good eating — a place where they can produce their own food from seed to plate. These types of projects do not just appear like a new [coat of paint after summer break](#) but require a push from either parents or the faculty. I have had the privilege of being invited to participate in creating such a garden and would like to share my [observations of the process](#) should you be interested in starting one in your community.

Garden of Eatin’

Every project starts with a person pushing an idea into action, and on this project, that person is Carol Sullivan.

Sullivan remembers casually pondering the prospect of a garden at her children’s school, Underhill Central School (UCS), with her husband. The next thing she knew, she was having discussions with the principal and gathering recruits — chiefly, her close friend Cindy Stotz, who became a sounding board for ideas. The project gained momentum as more parents expressed interest in participating. Half the fun was thinking of all of the garden-related talent in the community and who could fulfill each role necessary to make it happen. As her plan began to take shape, the next step was to take the concept to the school.

Sullivan had already received an enthusiastic response from Principal Michael Berry. They found a spot on the edge of the campus, close enough to the building without encroaching on playgrounds and playing fields. The next hurdles: Taking the project to the School Board and ultimately to the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) for funding. Sullivan was very cautious to make it clear that this plan was meant to be a resource for the school and not extra work for any of the staff.

Hoping to highlight the many ways it could be used, she stated the following in her address to the PTO: “A school garden would function as an education center. It could be utilized in many curriculums as a learning aid for nutrition education, math and natural sciences. The garden could integrate composting and add healthy options to our lunch program. We plan to grow food for our local food shelf ‘grow a row’ program. Other events could include a community potluck or a back-to-school harvest lunch celebration. A garden would also beautify the property and bring the community together.”

Her pitch was a success, and along with some funding, she had several faculty express interest in

participating.

The next step involved lots of lists: lists of volunteers, lists of supplies needed, lists of potential funding, lists of schedules for each season. To date the project already as a garden design, a farmer-consultant (yours truly), and a growing crowd of parents, students and faculty, who are excited to get their hands dirty. The task at hand is to tackle those lists now so the garden will be complete by planting time next spring. The site has been mowed and tilled and the first of many meetings to come is being scheduled.

Laura Sorkin runs Cave Moose Farm in Cambridge. Have a question about your food or growing issues? E-mail her at laura.sorkin@hotmail.com.

Additional Facts

Resources for you

If you are interested in starting a garden project in your area, there are several nonprofit groups that can help.

- **Green Mountain Farm to School Program**(334-2044; www.greenmountainfarmtoschool.org) works with schools to provide an after-school program for grades 2-6. The group helps get the garden up and running and keeps it going with summer programs. Started in 2005, the nonprofit serves 15 communities in the Northeast Kingdom and is planning on expanding.

- **Friends of Burlington Gardens** (861-GROW; www.burlingtongardens.org) provides consulting, grants and support for gardens in Chittenden County as well as greater Vermont. Executive Director Jim Flint said the amount of interest in community gardens has exploded in the past few years. Flint said he has seen a 50 percent to 60 percent increase in traffic to the Web site in the past year.

When I asked him the key to a successful project, he answered: "The more the community can have a stake in the garden the better."

Flint also mentioned that every town in Chittenden County now has a community garden except Richmond, Jericho and Underhill.

We are going to be a list-tackling, ground-breaking, dirt-moving organization from now until spring to get ourselves out of the latter group. I will report on the progress of our journey next spring. If interested in contributing or getting involved in this project, contact Carol Sullivan at sage07@comcast.net or Cindy Stotz at cindystotz1@myfairpoint.net.
