



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

A Garden From Concrete; Children Plant, Weed and Learn About Nature in Post-Katrina New Orleans Schoolyard

By Janet McConnaughey, Quotes Rose Hayden-Smith

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A concrete schoolyard has been transformed into a garden of learning in hurricane-recovering New Orleans, where students plant and weed, harvest produce and learn to cook it.

There are lessons in arithmetic and science but chef Alice Waters said what's most important is the children's reverence for the food they eat. Waters helped create the Edible Schoolyard at Samuel J. Green Charter School, 14 years after planting the first such plot in Berkeley, Calif., where she operates Chez Panisse restaurant.

"They're learning to work with the tools of the kitchen very confidently," said Green principal Tony Recasner.

For students shuttled from city to city after Hurricane Katrina flooded 80 per cent of New Orleans in 2005, it is a happy distraction amid daily reminders of the devastation.

Even kids who don't go to Green stop by to plant and weed.

Michael Riley often drops by after changing out of his own school uniform. "I just saw all the beautiful plants and wanted to help," Michael said during the recent one-year anniversary garden party featuring hors d'oeuvres assembled and passed around by students, including his cousin Terrence Brown.

School gardens aren't new, but the concept is growing as educators try to connect students with practical and less violent interests. The word "kindergarten" - children-garden - was coined in 1840 by German educator Friedrich Froebel, who saw school as both a metaphoric garden for children and a place for them to learn about nature in planted gardens.

Definitive data is scarce. However, the National Gardening Association's online registry lists 1,500 school gardens, up from 1,100 a year ago, spokeswoman Barbara Richardson said. The actual number is many thousands more.

California alone had about 1,000 instructional school gardens in 1995 and 3,000 in 2000. Nearly 3,850 schools - more than 40 per cent of all state schools - got state grants last year to begin or improve gardens, said Rose Hayden-Smith, adviser for a University of California program that teaches children where food comes from.



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Career skills grow along with plants.

For example, garden program graduates have become landscapers and tree surgeons working for the school system, said Matthew “Mud” Baron, garden specialist for the Los Angeles school district.

At Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, Food from the Hood, a student-run company, sells salad dressings made from school-grown herbs. Each hour worked by a student-manager translates into scholarship money.

The program at Green began last year. The concrete schoolyard has given way to one-third acre of pathways, flourishing herbs and sprouting seedlings. Even the front fence, with sweet peas twining up black iron and blooming in rainbow profusion and the wide brick planters flanking the front steps are part of the Edible Schoolyard. Basil, sage and rosemary burgeon in the planters along with chives, sweet potatoes, and nasturtiums (which have edible flowers).

Also growing are marigolds, coleus and snapdragons.

“Those are edible by butterflies,” said Donna Cavato, who directs the program.

Green was one of 26 failing schools - 22 of them in New Orleans - offered up by the state in early 2005 for operation by universities or as charter schools. In July 2005, it was handed over to Recasner, a psychologist who opened New Orleans Charter Middle School in 1998. “Sixty per cent of the kids who were attending the school when we took it over had a probation officer,” he said.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit. While nearly two-thirds of the students on probation never returned, the enrolment of 320 students continues to be made up of children from poor and working-class families. New Orleans Charter Middle School was hit much harder by the storm than Green, so both were consolidated at Green when it reopened for kindergarten through eighth-graders.

A legacy from New Orleans Charter was an elective class on gardening, created with a grant from the Fertel Foundation. Randy Fertel, of the educational foundation, connected Waters with the school and she offered to establish an Edible Schoolyard at Green.

turned down

Recasner turned down Fertel’s idea at first. There were so many urgent needs. “I’d lost the entire school faculty, kids were scattered across the country, and I’d taken on the responsibility of getting the school open as fast as I could,” Recasner said.

But he quickly changed his mind. “I realized it was just what we needed to do to restore kids’ confidence in the soil and in the city. Also, I thought it’d be a great therapeutic tool” - an island of calmness.



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“I didn’t want to have a building of social workers waiting to greet the kids,” he said.

Waters’ Chez Panisse Foundation is talking with the Monte del Sol charter school in Santa Fe, N.M., and with schools in Los Angeles and organizations in Greensboro, N.C., and Pittsburgh, said Marsha Guerrero, director of partnerships.

Gardening has taken root in seven-year-old Green student Alshawn Plain, whose grandmother Dianne Lewis said she and Alshawn have planted tomatoes in her back yard. He’s also planted them at his own house nearby.

“When we go to the store, he wants to get seeds for the plants,” she said.

Renada Jones, who attended Green in the mid-1990s but has lived in Houston since Hurricane Katrina, remembers it as a violent place. “Now it looks better,” she said as she walked with nine-month-old son Dawayne Cook Jr. and two-year-old daughter Trinity Cook.

“It makes you want to put your children in here.”