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PLACES



At James Madison Elementary School in Pasadena, California, children receive practical lessons about agriculture in the school garden, *above*

Culinary plants from the garden, such as rosemary, *above left*, and beetroot, *above right*, are harvested as ingredients for cookery lessons

## LEARNING OFF THE LAND

**T**oday's cookery assignment is coleslaw, but first the 20 nine-year-olds in the class have to assemble the ingredients. Gardener Leigh Talmo and teacher José Guzman divide the class into groups of five, and the children rush out into the garden. It looks as if the carefully planted beds of herbs, lettuces and nasturtiums are about to be trampled underfoot.

But the plants survive unmolested, except some carrots and cabbages, which are picked, and a few daisies, which are plucked and tucked behind the girls' ears. Soon, a peaceful enchantment sets in. The girls sit in the shade washing and shelling peas. Boys shake earwigs from cabbages. A ginger-haired toddler belonging to a local onlooker teeters eagerly between the two groups.

So proceeds a fourth-grade cookery class at James Madison Elementary School in Pasadena, southern California. At this school, children are taught about nutrition and cooking using real food, grown on the premises, rather than with charts and textbooks. "Here, every lesson involves eating," Talmo explains.

This garden is part of a growing trend in California. Although

school gardens are not a new idea, they have enjoyed increased publicity since the superintendent of schools, Delaine Eastin, called for one to be set up in each of the state's 8,000 public schools. "With a garden, you can teach science, nutrition, history and culture," she says. "It can be a very powerful learning tool."

Eastin has pushed so hard for them that, last October, a bill promoting school gardens was passed by the state legislature and rubber-stamped by the governor. This is the most important measure bringing agriculture into the cities since the modern American farmers' market movement began in LA in 1979.

The model that Eastin frequently extols, in her promotion of these educational gardens, is the 'edible schoolyard' at Martin Luther King Jr Middle School in Berkeley. Started in 1994 by the activist-chef Alice Waters, this not only has children growing food, but supplying their cafeteria. Waters has been a leading light on the Berkeley food scene since she opened her restaurant, Chez Panisse, in 1971 as the embodiment of her philosophy of high-quality, seasonal produce. "Alice was instrumental in getting

the school cafeteria reconfigured and modernised," says Eastin.

But although there is no doubting the importance of Waters's contribution, emphasis on it too often obscures the Berkeley school-garden movement's far humbler origins. The first school garden in that trend-setting town on San Francisco Bay was not the work of a campaigning chef, but of an anonymous parent.

This pioneering garden is located at Le Conte Elementary School. Here, in 1985, parents set up a small children's zoo. Later, this was joined by a butterfly reserve and vegetable garden. The vegetable garden is designed to be at once welcoming and childproof. "The plant beds are raised, so that kids in wheelchairs can get to them, and spaced so that children can work in them without walking in them," science teacher Jennifer Smallwood explains. Food preparation is minimal. "We do some cooking, but more eating right out of the garden," she continues. "This makes clear the connection between food and soil. The other day, I cut up a beet and the kids just ate it. Before that, they might have thought that beets came from the market, not the ground."

What better way could there be for children to learn about food than by growing their own? Emily Green reports on California's flourishing school gardens. Photographs by Marissa Roth

The reason why the children can safely eat food right out of the garden is that none of the school gardens use pesticides. "We talk about companion planting and integrated pest management and that whole sustainable way of gardening," says Smallwood. "They learn that water from the garden runs off into the bay, and about how pesticides in that water will cause pollution."

Today, after 15 years of the school-garden programme, 12 out of Berkeley's 17 state schools have them. Last year, as a knock-on effect, the Berkeley Unified School District voted to prefer organic food wherever possible in all of its schools' canteens.

Four hundred miles south, in the hot, fertile valleys of Ventura County, the school-garden movement is less the product of townie liberals, more of common-sense farmers and gardeners. The most important of those farmers was an old lady named Thelma Hansen, whose family farmed in Ventura between 1903 and 1993. She had seen the area as virgin territory, but, by her nineties, she was alarmed at the gradual encroachment of the LA suburbs and the disappearance of walnut, citrus and apricot groves.



After cultivating their vegetables, the children have the final satisfaction of consuming the fruits of their labours, *above right*

By 1992, one of her fondest wishes was for young people to be taught the importance of agriculture. When she died in 1993, she left \$8 million in a charitable trust for that very purpose. Today, through the Hansen Trust, 450 teachers have been trained in how to set up school gardens. And, in seven years, more than 100 of Ventura's 187 state schools have started gardens.

However, it was the visit of English landscape architect, Bill Lucas, that gave the school-garden programme an unexpected educational depth. A parent called Beth McGrath heard Lucas speak at an American Horticultural Society conference about work being done in London as part of a programme called 'Learning Through Landscapes'. Gardens, McGrath realised, could be used to teach not only agriculture, but every subject imaginable.

The garden that she went on to found at Blanche Reynolds Open Classroom in the town of Ventura is like a natural-history museum. It has a garden walk used to teach geography, with tropical, Mediterranean, arid and desert planting, from begonias to cacti. Latin and Greek are taught through plant names, maths through garden design, art through pottery and drawing, and so

on. Projects have included growing wheat and making bread, donating vegetables to homeless shelters and cooking for parents.

McGrath's own passion is for composting. "This was one of my favourite projects because it not only showed children that they are capable of making soil, but also gave us a great opportunity to teach them about the cycle of life itself," she says.

Fifty miles south, in Los Angeles County, conditions are not so favourable. The LA Unified School District struggles with overcrowding, competing mother tongues of English and Spanish, low test scores and poverty. Yet, even in these circumstances, an alliance of science teachers and parents has succeeded in getting gardens going in 200 of the county's 915 schools.

School gardens are, by definition, about making connections. They draw the countryside into the city, parents into schools, teachers and children into the environment, and every one of us into a greater awareness of where our food comes from.

*To find out more about school gardens in the USA, contact Nonnie Korten at the Monlux Math, Science and Technology Center, 6155 Bel Air Avenue, North Hollywood, California 91606. Tel. 00 1 818 762 1156.*