

Spring Lake Elementary School

An Illinois garden case study

QUICK FACTS

Site type:	School
School district:	Spring Lake CCSD 606 (one-school district)
Location:	Manito, IL
Enrollment:	50
Free & Reduced:	44%
Size:	Approx. 1000 sq. ft.
Type of garden:	Vegetable, fruit, orchard, pollinator
Include education?	YES
Use volunteers?	YES
Produce usage:	Produce used in the school meals; sent home with students; future plans of donation.

Introduction

Troy Galvin, Spring Lake Grade School District's building and maintenance supervisor, sole custodian and now chief gardener, is the leading frontier in the school's farm-to-cafeteria program. Two years ago, Galvin and the school's head cook, Teresa McAdams, discussed opportunities for utilizing the open, large grassy area behind the school.. As a fourth generation farmer, Galvin felt turning the 1,000 square foot space into a garden would be the best use of the space as it would be beneficial to the students and faculty.

With the help of the University of Illinois Extension, hardworking volunteers, community support and generous donors, their school garden was built. In the garden they grow tomatoes, green beans, strawberries, sweet potatoes, peppers, garlic, zucchini, squash, kohlrabi (to name a few), and an orchard with more than twenty pear, peach and apple trees. There's also a small pollinator garden that was created by local Girl Scouts and continued by a first grade teacher.



Use of Food

The garden produces a great yield that is then used for meals in the cafeteria. Utilizing fresh and seasonal fruits and vegetables for meals can be a great challenge, however, McAdams has enjoyed the opportunity to be creative and cook from scratch. Using produce from the garden for lunchtime meals has not only saved the school money, but it has provided healthier options and exposed children to new foods they may not have tried otherwise.



One of the new exposures for the students was trying kohlrabi grown in the garden. Since most of the kids had never heard of or tried it, they were very skeptical. Galvin stands behind the idea of encouraging the children to try all the produce the garden has to offer before deciding they do not like it. He served the fresh kohlrabi with ranch dressing, and the students loved it! The garden couldn't grow enough kohlrabi to keep up with the demand. This opportunity allowed the kids to learn about and enjoy a new, healthy snack that they can return to when they are older and making eating decisions.



With such a high yield of produce, there has been a surplus of some items. Last year the school had an abundance of cucumbers, so Galvin decided to use them in the water served at lunch. The children were ecstatic over the cucumber water and continually asked for its return even when their garden stopped producing the produce item. Galvin also placed surplus cucumbers by the doors for students to take on their way home, and later received many messages from parents sharing the excitement they witnessed in their children.

With Thanksgiving coming up and a large yield of sweet potatoes this season, McAdams baked sweet potato pies, which the children enjoyed even more than the traditional pumpkin pies. McAdams has also made stuffed peppers for students along with offering cucumbers and peppers to take home almost daily when in season. With Spring Lake Elementary School being

smaller than most - an enrollment of 50 students total and a grade average of 10 - it is easier for them to provide healthy, home made meals for lunch periods.

Garden Education

The garden has provided a fun, hands-on opportunity for the Spring Lake children to learn and connect with food and nature. Galvin hosts a class every few weeks in the garden to educate students on how to start a seed, watch it grow and then harvest it. This allows students to be present for the agricultural process and facilitates a better understanding of how food ends up on their lunch plate. Galvin also teaches students the importance of eating healthy and how the seasons affect produce.



Farming was a large part of Galvin's childhood, so he appreciates the opportunity to provide this experience for the students at his school. They are able to plant root vegetables and dig them up themselves when they are ready to harvest, which is a task the children have truly enjoyed. Fostering this experience has been unique since most of the students have never dug up vegetables.

Kindergarteners are also getting involved in the garden. Two years ago, the young students helped plant the school's orchard with trees donated by local organizations and businesses. Local media sources came out to make the planting a [celebration](#). Since fruit trees do not produce until after a few years, the kindergarteners will be able to taste the fruits of their labor when they are 5th and 6th graders (the school is K-6). The students also learned about Johnny Appleseed and, prior to the garden, were only shown photos of apple trees. Now, the children are brought out to the orchard where they can care for an actual apple tree. The fruit that is not used in the cafeteria will be given to food banks and those who contributed to the garden. Galvin is eager to give back to those who have helped make the school garden a reality.



The garden does not utilize harsh chemicals, which Galvin highlights in his lessons to the children. Because of this, the crops have bug damage; Galvin uses this as another learning experience in what organic and treated produce looks like. He believes this education is vital to heighten the children's awareness of environmental issues and encourage positive, sustainable behaviors when purchasing food themselves.

Next Steps

The students' excitement for the garden has grown it into a labor of love. He also has plans to construct a greenhouse for next year which will provide more opportunity for harvests and education. Staff expressed that though it is hard work to maintain the garden and create healthy meals from its yields, it is well worth the effort. Volunteers are extremely important to the success of the garden program and offer support over the summer when students are not present to tend the plants. To gather even more manpower, Galvin would like to increase the amount of volunteers using competition with an award for best gardener.



When Galvin began the garden he felt if he “taught one kid the importance of gardening and encouraged them to start their own, then it would all be worthwhile.” Since then, Galvin has educated and inspired a number of kids and adults; many kids have gone home and asked their parents if they could start their own garden.

Spring Lake Elementary School's successful garden program is unique but also obtainable by any school, big or small. Having a dedicated Farm to School champion can make all the difference, and every community has a distinct set of resources and people dedicated to supporting its youth in nutrition education and access to healthy food. If you're interested in growing a garden program at your child feeding site and would like help or resources, reach out to us at the Illinois Farm to School Network.

Photos courtesy of Troy Galvin.

