

## **The Lincoln Elementary School Community Organic Garden Lessons for Other School Gardens**

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### **Brief History**

The Lincoln Elementary School Community Organic Garden was established in 1994. It was created through the vision and hard work of several Lincoln community members, notably Michael Dempster, who was then and remains our fabulous science teacher, Brian Sims, a Lincoln parent at the time, and Susan Moser, a commercial organic gardener and also a Lincoln parent at the time of the garden's inception.

Funding and in-kind support was provided by the City of Olympia Public Works Department, Briggs Nursery, the Olympia school district, the South Capitol Neighborhood Association, Hardel Lumber, Lew Rents, Olympia Supply, and other businesses and organizations.

Our garden includes an 1800 square foot greenhouse and over 2000 square feet of crop space on a quarter-acre, fenced setting. The garden program has been continuous since 1994, and has always been managed by parent volunteers. While some garden activities have remained consistent since the beginning, other activities vary depending on volunteer interest and availability.

### **What is unique about the Lincoln Elementary School Garden Program**

Several characteristics of the Lincoln Elementary School academic program complement the school garden program. Lincoln is an alternative, public K-5 school, with a well-articulated philosophy that stresses developmentally appropriate instruction, integrated curriculum, and parent and family involvement. The educational program further focuses on development of the whole child and environmental stewardship. The strong articulation of these philosophic underpinnings results in a school community where teachers and parents value and support the educational opportunities provided by a school garden. For instance, all the teachers appreciate the opportunity to integrate garden activities into their curriculum, and parents expect to spend many hours at the school working with kids both in the classroom and in the garden.

The importance of this shared philosophy to the success of our garden program is immense. Our garden program could not be sustained without a high level of parent involvement. Many parents choose to send their children to Lincoln in part because of the garden program, and many parents participate in the garden on a regular or occasional basis. We have work parties one Saturday a month throughout most of the year, and sometimes have 25 or more people (including kids). Many families also commit to watering and tending the garden for a week at a time during the summer. Still, ensuring adequate parent participation in the garden remains our biggest ongoing struggle.

Teachers' direct participation in the garden is limited. Mostly, they set aside times when parent volunteers or interns can work with their students in the garden in small groups.

Another uncommon quality of Lincoln Elementary School is that we have an unusual teaching position staffed by a unique person, Michael Dempster. Michael teaches science and music to each of the twelve classes for a half day every other week. He frequently takes kids to the garden or the greenhouse during "Michael time" to observe and study natural phenomena or to do garden work.

### **Lessons for Other School Garden Programs**

Other pieces of the Lincoln garden program could be more easily replicated by more traditional schools. Here are some tactics that add to Lincoln's success, and that might be modified for use by other school garden programs.

Develop a Relationship with a Source of Free Labor and Expertise: We benefit greatly by our relationship with the Evergreen State College. We take on 4-12 Evergreen students as garden interns every spring. Sometimes we have interns in winter and summer quarters as well. These interns work with our volunteer garden coordinator, and bring kids to the garden in small groups every week of the spring quarter. The interns typically are at the garden for 8-10 each per week, and spend about half of their time working with kids, and the other half doing garden maintenance. Through this relationship, we insure that every child gets at least 20 minutes of garden time each week. We are also able to have the garden open for kids to enjoy at recess time, when we have interns available. The interns do require a high level of supervision and support, especially early in the quarter, and their supervisor needs to write an evaluation of their performance at the end of the quarter.

Other opportunities for free labor and expertise might be developed with Puget Sound Community College, Master Gardeners of Olympia, or Avanti High School.

Plant Gardens Providing Quick Gratification: We are lucky to have a large greenhouse with an in-ground bed (approximately 4'x8') for each class. Interns and students plant these beds in mid-April with quick growing crops like greens, peas, flowers, and radishes. Kids can watch the development of these crops over the course of the spring, and harvest and enjoy them before school is out for summer. In the absence of a greenhouse, these same crops can be planted outdoors (you might want to start a little earlier), and would hopefully ripen before summer break.

Have Each Class Adopt a Crop: At Lincoln, each class grows the same crop outdoors every year. This allows for the teacher to get very knowledgeable about his or her class' adopted crop, and to develop curriculum to complement the growing of that crop. For instance, the class of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders that grows corn every year has a wealth of activities they engage in: a planting ceremony with bucket drums, making corn husk dolls, calculating the harvest using estimation, researching the uses of corn in commercial products, and serving corn on the cob at our Harvest Festival. By growing the same crop every year, teachers have the continuity of established lesson plans, while students "graduate" to different classrooms and crops.

Plan Festivals that Celebrate the Garden: This is a great way to generate enthusiasm and support for the garden. In the past, we have had a May Day celebration that included a plant sale, a May pole, flower wreath making, garden songs, and other activities.

One of our school's most anticipated and best-loved events is our Harvest Festival, usually held the last Friday in September. This is a half-day celebration enjoyed by the entire school community. Often, families that have graduated from Lincoln return for the Harvest Festival.

All of the classes' adopted crops are planted with a target harvest date of mid-September, for use in the Harvest Festival. During the month of September, Michael holds all his classes in the garden, and splits the class time between scientific investigations (such as this fall's study of solar energy) and care of classes' adopted crops. Late in September, the class crops are harvested, and cooked (by students and parents) for lunch at the Harvest Festival.

Harvest Festival activities include hay jumping, cider pressing, making mud pies with dried flowers on top, pumpkin seed spitting, head wreath making, leaf prints, and apple bobbing. We serve all the children and all the adults (staff and visitors) a lunch cooked primarily from garden bounty (spaghetti squash, pesto, vegetable soups, stir fries, pies). Again, each class usually prepares the same dish every year, so teachers don't need to start from scratch. Extra garden produce is sold at our garden stand at the Harvest Festival, and the income generated helps support the following year's garden.

Hold a Plant Sale to Raise Funds for the Garden: We grow lots of extra plants and sell them in the spring to raise money for the garden. This year, we put together a preorder form and distributed it to every parent in hopes of turning our starts sale into a more profitable venture.