



Food Corps: Cultivating a Sustainable School Garden Program

By Sarah Rubin

It's been well over a decade since I graduated from elementary school, but most days I still eat lunch in a school cafeteria. As a school garden educator working with K-5 students, I make a point of eating with them so I can provide a gentle reminder that the food on their plates, in its initial form, originated from the soil - much like the food we've grown outside in the school's raised garden beds. The experience never disappoints. Students chat with me about their favorite cartoon characters, ask questions about my meals, and deliver charming stream-of-consciousness monologues about anything that grabs their attention. Last week I found myself engaged in an age-old form of cafeteria commerce: trading. I accepted two Cheez-Its from a 2nd grader under the condition that he try a spoonful of my wheat berry salad from the lunch line, a new healthy item that the cafeteria offers once a month. I watched him take a tentative bite and found myself thinking, as I so often do these days, "I have a wonderfully unconventional job."

I'm a [FoodCorps](#) service member, one of 50 people who are building school gardens, increasing nutrition education, and bringing high-quality local food into school cafeterias in ten states throughout the country. The ultimate goal is to bring about lasting change in children's relationship to food. Those of us serving with FoodCorps collectively endeavor to help young people understand what nutritious food is and where it comes from, and then work to provide sufficient access to it.

Incorporated as a 501(c)(3) in 2010, FoodCorps couldn't have come at a better time. One in three children born in 2000 are expected to develop Type II diabetes, one of several diet-related diseases that disproportionately affect low-income children.ⁱ Food access, a closely related problem, is a growing challenge, with millions of households in America struggling to provide enough food for their children. To make matters more difficult, young people are confronted daily with an average of twelve food-related TV advertisements, many of them promoting junk food.ⁱⁱ If only carrots had a multi-billion dollar marketing budget! Children deserve to be equipped with the tools they need to look critically at these ads and make healthy food choices, but the typical elementary student receives just over three hours of nutrition education each year, not nearly enough to help them see the validity in choosing fruit over Fruit Roll-Ups.ⁱⁱⁱ

Part of FoodCorps' strategy is to pair service members with local partner organizations that are already



effecting change in the realms of outdoor classroom learning, nutrition education, and cafeteria food procurement. I was pleased to be placed at [CitySprouts](#), a Cambridge-based nonprofit that collaborates with public schools to integrate garden education into teachers' curricula. CitySprouts provides professional development for teachers on extending classroom lessons outside to the school garden, and seasonal CitySprouts garden coordinators lend additional support and expertise. Many teachers have used these resources to become adept at making their school's outdoor space a vividly hands-on teaching tool throughout the growing season. Their lucky students



chart pea growth, write science journal entries about pollination, and learn about the workings of simple machines when they press apples into fresh cider in the fall. As an inaugural FoodCorps service site, CitySprouts has been applying its successful model at two high-need elementary schools in Gloucester, MA. Since August 2011, I have been serving at Veteran's Memorial Elementary, where nearly 70% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. We arrived at the start of the school year, delivered an introductory presentation, and got to work building eight raised beds outside the entrance to Veterans' Elementary right away. The physical process of constructing and planting the gardens was quick and straightforward, thanks to the expertise of [The Food Project](#), another FoodCorps host site collaborating with CitySprouts in Gloucester. But teacher buy-in was initially difficult, and for good reason; only a few months earlier, teachers at Veterans' had been tasked with teaching a brand new core curriculum to raise literacy rates, an overwhelming responsibility that left little room for creativity or flexibility. Despite CitySprouts' emphasis on the garden as a helpful tool that can illustrate tough concepts and engage kinesthetic learners, it initially appeared that the teachers, though appreciative of the garden's lush beauty, were unable to devote time to using it.



Still, the marriage of CitySprouts and FoodCorps created an ideal pairing under the circumstances. Whereas CitySprouts garden coordinators in Cambridge work seasonally and divide their time between multiple schools, my ability to be at Veterans' on most weekdays allowed me to quickly learn about the culture of the school and get to know students as we watered the seedlings and picked fat caterpillars off the cabbage leaves. My frequent presence at Veterans' also allowed me to reach teachers quickly with introductory garden lessons that I developed. These basic activities, like soil observations and garden scavenger hunts, helped teachers and students become

comfortable in the garden and helped me establish general garden guidelines.

Over time, I began collaborating with teachers to help them build a more intentional role for the garden in their classroom lesson planning. Both fifth grade teachers came up with the idea to translate the garden's gorgeous leaf lettuce into a Plant Parts Salad activity that aligned with the science frameworks. First, I brought the students outside to harvest lettuce and herbs, showing them how to delicately snip across the top of the leaves as if giving them a haircut. Back in the classroom, their teacher held up a large diagram of the six botanical plant parts and spoke about their functions. Then, best of all, students got to create their own personalized salads using each of these parts, from roots (carrots) to flowers (spicy nasturtium petals) to seeds (sesame). I taught students how to make a vinaigrette from a simple ratio of olive oil to vinegar - a math connection! - and they added the herbs they had harvested to make their own concoction. Everyone came away from the activity feeling satisfied; each student got to make an edible creation, their teacher filled her science block with a fun, relevant activity, and I felt that teachers at Veterans' were beginning to see the myriad ways in which the garden could illustrate the concepts in their curricula.

My unique role as a FoodCorps service member at the school has allowed me to engage kids in gardening and healthy eating outside of the classroom as well. Together with the school's adjustment counselor, I started a before-school weekly Garden Club, and I'm currently in the process of collaborating with other FoodCorps colleagues to develop a series of monthly cafeteria events that promote adventurous eating. But when I think about the future of garden-based learning at this elementary school beyond my year of service, I see the most replicable components of this program being those that the teachers initiate and develop themselves. Once teachers see the potential in the garden as a relevant and helpful teaching resource, I believe they will work to maintain it, and continue to benefit from it, well into the future.

ⁱ <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Diabetes/diabetes-half-us-adults-risk-2020-unitedhealth-group/story?id=12238602>

ⁱⁱ http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Food_Television_Food/

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr6005a1.ht>

Sarah Rubin, a FoodCorps service member, coordinates garden and food education at an elementary school in Gloucester, MA, a role that combines her diverse agricultural and culinary experience with her love of working with youth. She may be contacted at srubin@citysprouts.org

