

Healthy, Fresh Fare from School & Community Gardens

School gardens are flourishing in San Diego! Kids can enjoy getting their hands dirty as they learn powerful lessons about their connection to the earth and to each other. While helping teach nutrition and environmental sustainability, school gardens also become every bit about their local communities. What could be better than communities joining forces with schools and families to deliver the best that gardening has to offer?

Growing What They Eat

Teaching nutrition and cultivating adventurous eaters is effortless when kids witness the magical process of seed to food. Only then can kids truly understand where their food comes from.

Cindy Jenson-Elliott, author and garden coordinator at Explorer Elementary Charter School in Point Loma, looks at gardening as a wake-up call. She relays a funny story of a student pulling a carrot from the ground and exclaiming, "I'm not going to eat that thing! It was in the dirt!"

"Dirt is made of decomposed bits of life, and those decomposed bits of life support our growing bits of life," says Jenson-Elliott. "It's a beautiful thing when we suddenly get it."

Kids do eventually get it, dirt and all. Digging a hole, planting a seed and lovingly tending even one plant is a sure way to get a child to eat his veggies.

Cooking What They Grow

Teaching kids to cook with food they've grown is when the magic comes full circle. It's never too late to learn how to prepare healthy and delicious meals, but giving kids the skills



"**The Center for a Healthy Lifestyle** is a magical, happy place, perfectly set up to teach children how to cook and enjoy healthy foods, straight from the garden! While the parents initially discover the Center, it's the kids who beg to come back, time and time again. And who doesn't want their child falling in love with kale chips while following monarch butterflies around?" — *Amanda Mascia* (cooking instructor and host of local kid's cooking show, "The Good Food Factory")

to create wholesome meals before they leave home is priceless.

The Boys and Girls Club in Solana Beach is lucky to have the "sunny yellow cottage" that is the Center For a Healthy Lifestyle (CenterforaHealthyLifestyle.com). The center features an interactive organic garden and hands-on teaching kitchen.

"When we harvest from the garden and we cook, I call it 'garden to belly,'" says Amanda Mascia, cooking instructor and host of local television program "The Good Food Factory." "It's the kid version of 'farm to table.'"

Field trips, cooking classes, camps and birthday parties held there are engaging, educational and delicious. A cooking lesson with a local chef, a nutrition activity or an active gardening class, including planting and composting, make the trip worthwhile.

Build an Oven!

Albert Einstein Academies, located in the neighborhood of South Park, has gardens throughout their campus. Every other week, Terri Hughes-Oelrich, Einstein's garden and sustainability coordinator, brings the kindergartners and 3rd graders to these outdoor spaces to learn about nutrition, gardening and sustainability.

"A couple of years ago, the 3rd graders built a wood-fired cob pizza oven in the edible garden," says Hughes-Oelrich. "They grew wheat on the hillside above the oven, harvested the wheat, ground it to flour with a local artist and made their own pizza dough with the flour."

A freestanding cob oven is a great way to incorporate all your garden veggies. Just throw them on a pizza! It's also an affordable project and a ton of fun to build.

"After all that," says Hughes-Oelrich of the work involved to build the cob oven, "what they loved the most was mixing the mud with their feet."

Special Focus on Diabetes

The Sage Garden Project brings a combination of gardening, cooking and nutritional science to elementary schools with the mission of reducing childhood diabetes. The organizers make sure kids know that their dietary and fitness choices directly relate to their health for a lifetime.



Sage Garden

California School Garden Network

www.csgn.org

Provides literature, resources, recipes and lesson plans for school garden to cafeteria projects.

The Edible Schoolyard Project

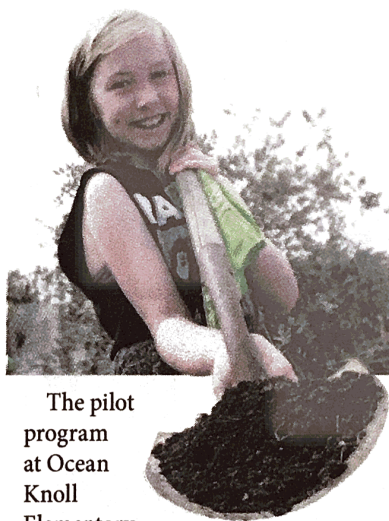
www.edibleschoolyard.org

Resources, education, success stories and more are featured on this networking website.

Woolly School Garden

www.woollyschoolgarden.org

Provides vertical, edible gardens and standards-based gardening and nutrition curriculum for schools.



The pilot program at Ocean Knoll Elementary

in Encinitas impacts 500 children every week. They are also bringing their program to two other schools that meet the criteria of a large percentage of kids in the at-risk category for diabetes.

"Our school year curriculum is based on 26 lessons for grades K-6, presenting coordinated experiences in the garden and the Nutritional Science Lab," says program coordinator Dawn Mayeda. "Standards-based, grade-level appropriate, seasonal lessons that touch on so many things—science, math, teamwork, nutrition, reading and following instructions."

Sage Garden also holds summer camps featuring harvesting from the garden and lots of cooking and exercise.

I like everything about the Sage Garden camps," says Amanda Engert, "But most of all, I like the variety of the ingredients we use and eating our delicious creations at the end of each day."

Check out their website for tried and true recipes, and online resources for families or sign up to volunteer! www.sagegardenproject.org.

Extreme Kitchen Redo

Recipients of Michelle Obama's inaugural 2012 *Let's Move! Childcare Recognition Award*, Neighborhood House Association's Nutrition Services is reaping the benefits of a large-scale kitchen overhaul ([Facebook.com/neighborhoodhousesandiego](https://www.facebook.com/neighborhoodhousesandiego)).

Sage Garden

The garden is so cool...we plant veggies, fruit, and herbs and it's fun to taste them. The best thing about Sage Garden is that we get to harvest from the garden and then cook them into something delicious. I also love interacting with other students and working in teams to accomplish making a tasty snack!

Also, Sage Garden has helped me to branch out and try new foods that I never would have thought of trying. We cooked veggies that I didn't even like to eat before, but now I love them and I have another fun recipe to share with my family!

All in all, I think Sage Garden has been a great experience and I learned so much about healthy food!

Lucie Shamlou

Sixth grader at Ocean Knoll Elementary School

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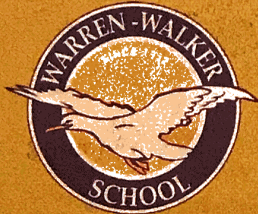
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The human services agency kitchen serves more than 5,000 prepared meals to San Diego preschoolers daily. Its Farm to Preschool menu is planned around San Diego's harvest season and is coordinated with their own curriculum.

Kristine Smith, a registered dietician with Neighborhood House, tackled a huge "to do" list that included creating healthy dishes that picky eaters would actually like, while reconfiguring an entire nutrition program to streamline time and cost. Whew!

"We create an experience for our preschoolers at every meal so they are interested in trying new and healthy foods," says Smith. "Our recipes and menus are designed to engage all five senses, so that it's easy to like our food!"

Quite literally, the proof is in the pudding.

Community Inspiration

Sixty preschoolers from the Cuyamaca College Child Development Center in El Cajon await the finishing touches on a plot of land between their center and the Water Conservation Garden that will be the new Cuyamaca College Intergenerational Garden (www.cuyamaca.edu). They've been practicing their gardening skills with local seniors who are happy to share their knowledge with the youngsters.

The County Health and Human Services Agency, local landscaper, George Mercer, fire stations, students, staff and so many more are donating time and resources to make the Intergenerational Garden a new San Diego jewel and a true community endeavor.

Following the Farm to Preschool curriculum developed by the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College, kids gain a basic understanding of good nutrition. The garden's harvest will be incorporated into the children's menus to be shared with the families and seniors.

After all, sharing is the ultimate garden magic. ♦

Laura Pardo writes from Central San Diego and is currently growing watermelons and bush beans.