

Jefferson Elementary School Gardeners: The Heart of New Ulm in Action

Throughout the community of New Ulm, the efforts of Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project have helped plant the seeds for knowledge and resources about healthier eating. One such seed was literally planted in 2017, when Jefferson Elementary started its schoolyard garden.

The garden was the brainchild of approximately 20 third-grade students at Jefferson, who formed a garden club that met many times during lunch and recess to discuss and plan how to get a garden planted at school. The students asked Beth Sletta, an educator in the STEM program (science, technology, engineering and math) if she would help them get the garden started, and she became the unofficial volunteer garden advisor. Soon after, all the ingredients came together.

“Students wanted to do something to help the pollinators around the school, teachers wanted an outdoor learning space, and both groups wanted to grow healthy foods right on school property to teach students how to grow their own food and make healthy food choices,” explained Sletta.

A True Sense of Ownership in the Garden

The students communicated with other teachers, parents and community partners, researched plants that would attract pollinators, and studied vegetables to see which would grow best in the schoolyard garden. The students also helped fundraise for the garden by designing a Fresh Air Garden that won a national cash prize.

Visiting the garden weekly with or without their advisor present, the students feel ownership of the garden and are proud of their success. In addition to periodically meeting with the initial group of students, Sletta also meets with groups of 20-30 students from the Kids Connection latchkey program every Friday during the summer. More than 100 different kids from the program work in the garden over the summer and harvest any produce that is ready. (Prior to having their own school garden, students in the summer program would bike to the New Ulm Community Garden for lessons and activities.)

After the young gardeners complete their garden work, they learn about nutrition. “We’ve taught students how to harvest basil, clean the leaves, store it and use the basil in recipes at home,” said Sletta. “We also froze plentiful harvests of strawberries and used them to show students how to make healthy smoothies. Beets were also harvested and cooked to introduce them to a vegetable many had not tried before.”



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(continued)



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– Beth Sletta, STEM educator in New Ulm Public Schools

Community Partners Join In, Too

The garden also welcomes several community partners, including John and Brooke Knisley from Alternative Roots CSA, who help them with gardening questions. Dr. Craig Sievert, a family medicine doctor from the New Ulm Medical Center and his wife Laura, have also visited the garden to teach the kids more about pollinators, and Sletta hopes to enlist the help of a nutrition expert or dietitian in the future. She teaches more than 650 students in grades 1-4 and uses the garden as an outdoor classroom for STEM and nutrition lessons. With limited garden produce during the winter, she plans to freeze or dehydrate as much produce as possible for use throughout the school year.

The seeds of the garden continue to grow and bear fruit. “Many students have encouraged their families to start small garden plots at home, or have begun growing herbs or vegetables in containers,” said Sletta. “Students and parents often contact me for recipes, garden ideas, or just to tell me about their gardens at home.”

The Jefferson Elementary schoolyard garden is part of a relatively new and comprehensive approach by the New Ulm Public Schools to build students’ knowledge and skills related to growing food and healthy options.

Education and exposure starts during the early childhood years at the Washington Learning Center, where kids have small beds for gardens and pollinators. At the high school, a brand new greenhouse and aquaponics operation is used by both the Agriculture and Family and Consumer Sciences departments for teaching students about growing foods and preparing healthier meals through a college-level Culinary Arts Program.

As New Ulm kids are showing, working together, New Ulm residents are collectively making the healthy choice the easy choice where they live, work, learn and play.