

Special Edition

EARTH BEATS

June 2015

Earth and Environment Commission Newsletter
US Region



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Gardening for Resilience at Infant Jesus School in Nashua

Submitted by
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For younger students, simpler yet still foundational understandings grow out of gardening experiences. For example, the children suddenly realize that seeds can be saved to start new plants or they notice that many kinds of insects, birds, and even spiders can be very helpful to their growing garden. They see the amazing effects that they can have upon their surroundings when they work together in a thoughtful and attentive way. They come to realize that garden visits offer opportunities to run about in the fresh air with their friends, to discover new creatures and interesting rocks and to help harvest and care for the various plants. Given these associations and experiences, the youngsters readily understand that gardening can become a socially productive and pleasant form of life-long exercise and refreshment - a form of recreation in the best sense of the word.



And of course, the plantings at Infant Jesus School enhance life in other ways. The species being grown have been selected to directly provide benefits for wildlife as well as human populations. Specific plants have been included to provide food and / or shelter for native invertebrates such as Monarchs and Karner Blue Butterflies. The main garden is a National Wildlife Federation Certified Wildlife Habitat®. As such, it is intended to serve as a refuge for birds and various other non-human beings struggling to survive in our city setting. At the same time, the blossoming gardens form little oases of Nature to benefit the people of our school and parish community, and our Nashua neighbors and passersby. They give God a chance to speak to individuals on a one-to-one basis through the entrancing beauty and marvels of Nature itself - as well as through Scripture.

The garden is graced with a lovely statue of the Holy Family, donated by the family of one of our former faculty members, which the children delight in decorating with fresh flowers or colorful leaves. The teachers can bring the youngsters out into the garden to read, conduct a lesson, or say the Rosary together. Additionally, the students at times are given opportunities to plant bulbs, collect herbs, gather seeds, prune the fruit trees, enjoy occasional tastings, rake leaves, harvest corn, and draw or paint the flowers and visiting pollinators. In the company of their friends, they observe the plants through the seasons, watering, weeding, and even tending the compost piles. They start plants in pots in the art/science room; they propagate others from leaf cuttings or root divisions, and they take care of the indoor “wormery” / compost system in the winter. The garden club youngsters (who meet once a week after school during the growing season) organize spring garden sales for the rest of the school community.

Through it all, we try to point out that the gardens are in essence the youngsters' collective, public art installation - a dynamic example of an important twenty-first century art form. We emphasize that the garden is living proof that the work of their hands and minds - the product of their deliberate, informed yet inborn creativity - can help make the world a more beautiful and healthier place. This can be a very empowering realization. The sacred and transformative role of human work, of service, is another vital message that we believe the gardens can transmit to children.

There are so many schools all across the state, country, and even the world that are turning to gardening as a way to develop valuable academic and social skills as well as deeper environmental awareness, customs of stewardship, and habits of wellness among the new generations. We have found strong support for our school gardening efforts from NH Farm to School, the UNH-Cooperative Extension, and NOFA-NH (the Northeast Organic Farming Association - NH). Infant Jesus School has also been fortunate to participate in the emerging NH Youth and School Gardening Network. We have been deeply inspired by Catholic teachings and the insights of Fr. Thomas Berry and his co-workers. There are so many remarkable organizations dedicated to supporting school gardening as a way to prepare children for a future world that is more aesthetically fulfilling, healthy, cooperative, and sustainable.



What follows are links to just a few of these organizational websites:



<http://nhfarmtoschool.org> This is the New Hampshire branch of a very well established national network. It draws upon the resources of the state's land grant university, UNH, as it strives to “connect schools [K-12] and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers.” As part of its mission, it fosters school gardens, gleaning programs, and much more. The website is very comprehensive with excellent lists of school gardening resources and many inspiring case studies of local schools.

<http://www.vitalcommunities.org/agriculture/uvfts/index.cfm> The Upper Valley Farm to School Network (now part of the Vital Communities nonprofit) offers fine programs and up-to-date information about gardening and educational initiatives throughout the Upper Connecticut River Valley.

<http://nofanh.org> This is the website for New Hampshire's branch of the Northeast Organic Farming Association. As an organization, it has been very supportive of efforts to establish a NH School and Youth Gardening Network. It offers information and workshops about local efforts to implement environmentally sound gardening and farming methods, as well as links to NH's Permaculture groups.

<https://youthgardencop.wordpress.com/> A helpful new website specifically focused on school gardening in New Hampshire and sponsored in large part by UNH Cooperative Extension. This is currently the best site for keeping up with the evolving NH School and Youth Gardening Network.

<http://msgn.org> This is the site for Maine's School Garden Network. It provides information about a range of thriving school gardening projects in Maine, lists of current gardening grant opportunities, and useful links to resources such as the Gardening For Life™ webinar series from the United States Botanic Gardens.

<http://vcgn> An excellent site highlighting gardening initiatives and events in Vermont.

<http://ecoliteracy.org> This is a group that focuses on education for sustainable living. It provides access to essays, books, and downloadable resources devoted to the development of healthy food cultures.

<http://edibleschoolyard.org> Alice Waters of Chez Panisse Restaurant and Foundation helped establish this organization whose mission “is to create and sustain an organic garden and landscape that is wholly integrated into the school's curriculum, culture, and food program.” The resulting project has become a model throughout the world. It features a large collection of lesson plans for classroom and garden use. It also sponsors an outstanding series of courses on Edible Education at the University of California, Berkley featuring leaders in the food movement. These free lectures can be accessed simply by going to the Resources section of the website and then to the subsection entitled Recommended Resources.

<http://gardens.slowfoodusa.org> This is the school gardening section of the US branch of an international organization with roots in Italy. Slow Food began in the 1980's as an alternative to the culture of 'fast food,' and is very much concerned with regional food traditions and biodiversity. As the international website states, "Slow Food envisions a world in which all people can access and enjoy food that is good for them, good for those who grow it and good for the planet." Hence the organization strives to promote "good, clean, fair food."
Edith Pucci Couchman, 2015