

## Growing minds

---

### School gardens can teach the basics and set up healthy eating patterns

By Deborah M. Schneider  
November 3, 2004

When I was a child, a visit to my aunt's farm in southern Ontario always transformed me: I ceased being a fussy city kid and became an omnivore.

I loved to coax sweet baby carrots out of the ground, rub the dirt off on my shorts and crunch away, or feel around in the earth for marble-sized new potatoes to eat.

Oh, what a paradise it seemed. And how few of our children today will ever know the taste of a gritty-sweet carrot right out of the ground.

Millions of dollars a year are spent advertising sugar-and fat-laden foods to our children, to the point where some don't understand the difference between orange soda and orange juice, or potatoes and potato chips.

But some schools are using gardens to teach urban kids, who may not have yards of their own, what fresh food tastes like, re-educating their palates and encouraging healthy eating habits.

For teachers, there's the opportunity to present lessons about science, food, nutrition and the environment. Gardens teach recycling, composting, water conservation and organic growing.

"The garden is the ultimate way to teach and can teach us a lot of lessons," said Janice Duvall of The Green Machine, a mobile project from the San Diego County Office of Education that presents interactive workshops on gardening at county schools.

"The world is our garden," Duvall added. "We need to learn to take care of it."

The school garden movement owes much to legendary chef Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley. Waters' dedication to ingredients from small farms and backyard gardens sparked the birth of California cuisine 30 years ago.



RONI GALGANO / Union-Tribune  
A student prepared to plant a bean, enlarged from soaking in water, in the garden at the Waldorf School of San Diego. The school incorporates growing and preparing food into its curriculum.

- [Planting the seeds of learning](#)
- [Tierra Miguel gives kids a taste of farm life](#)

### For more information:

■Tierra Miguel Farm: (760) 742-1151; [www.tierramiguel.org](http://www.tierramiguel.org).

■Waldorf School of San Diego: (619) 280-8016; [www.waldorfschoolofsandiego.org](http://www.waldorfschoolofsandiego.org).

■The Edible Schoolyard: (510) 558-1335; [www.edibleschoolyard.org](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org).

From left, Riley Grace Reno, Laine West and Allegra Much learned about composting at Tierra Miguel Farm in Pauma Valley. She is still very much a part of this green revolution, in part because of a rundown school she drove by every day on the way to her restaurant.

"I got thinking about what could be done for this school," Waters said. So in 1994, she and a dedicated cadre of parents, teachers and gardeners adopted Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Oakland and worked something amazing. They called the project The Edible Schoolyard.

Before long, the schoolyard was in bloom with healthy vegetables that the kids themselves, aided by volunteers, watered, weeded and harvested.

Like rabbits, the students started to nibble on what they grew: a pea here, a lettuce leaf there, and before you could say Jack Sprat, they were avidly eating the fresh vegetables they had snubbed only months before.

Waters' Edible Schoolyard experiment, along with the successes of many other schools, demonstrates that even in the most difficult setting, kids are happy to get their hands dirty.

### Down the path

The Friendship Garden at Pacific Beach Elementary School is a tiny dirt patch tucked into a corner of the huge asphalt schoolyard. A not-very-scary scarecrow guards the whitewashed archway between two raised beds. The boxes are planted with sunflowers and herbs, pole beans and tomatoes, herbs and corn. A huge cotton plant thrives in this remote corner.

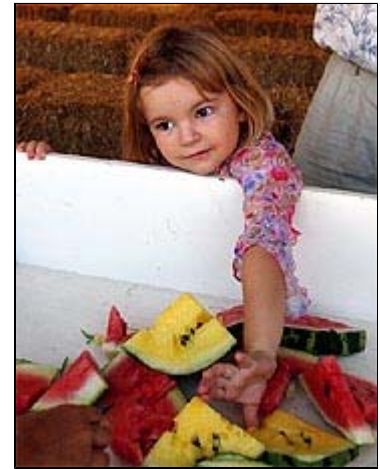
Kim Schoettle is the school's garden mom. She became interested in the school garden when her first child started school four years ago.

"We just want to expose kids to the outdoors," said Schoettle. "We have had kids scared to death to hold an earthworm. Some don't even know how to put a plant in the ground. One planted the whole pot."

Parent docents lead groups of children into the garden to plant, weed, harvest and taste. Schoettle has hosted popular tastings of pizza herbs and Mexican herbs, and other events designed to work with the school's curriculum.

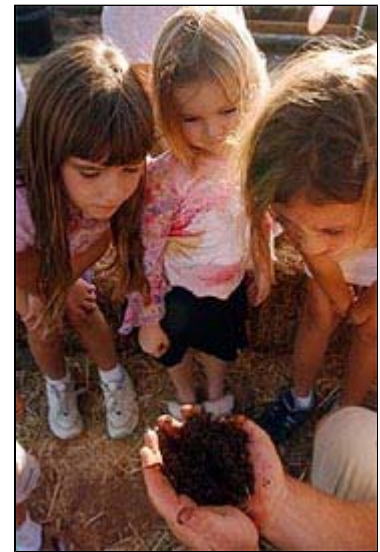
Her goal is to find more places where teachers can work the garden into their teaching, using it for learning as well as fun. For instance, teachers use the growing of corn in lessons on Native American cultures.

Governments at every level have programs to promote school gardens and farm-to-school links. The California Department of Education passed a resolution in 1995 calling for every school in the state to have a garden. But these multiple sources have little communication with each other, and schools and parents are left to flounder through a bewildering thicket of



CRISSY PASCUAL /  
Union-Tribune

Laine West, 5, of Valley Center reached for some watermelon during a trip to Tierra Miguel Farm.



CRISSY PASCUAL /  
Union-Tribune

From left, Riley Grace Reno, Laine West and Allegra Much learned about composting at Tierra Miguel Farm in Pauma Valley.

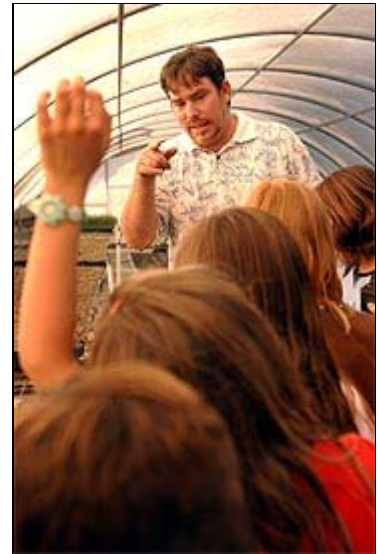
ideas, guidelines and standards – none of which actually offers funding to build a garden.

Duvall, of the County Office of Education, suggests that interested schools first study gardening basics. Her program, The Green Machine, presents workshops on composting, soil building, friendly bugs, water conservation, recycling, sustainable gardening and nutrition. After the initial contacts, she recommends partnering with a teaching farm like Tierra Miguel (see accompanying story).

Schoettle estimates the Pacific Beach Elementary garden cost around \$2,000 in 1999, and it has received several grants and in-kind donations since then. Like all San Diego school gardens, it receives no funds or maintenance assistance from the school district, although the district does provide water and consultation on plant types, layout and safety.

Five years after the garden was created, Schoettle's wish list is long, and funds are short. She envisions a much larger garden, close to the center of the schoolyard with a stand of shade and fruit trees, four larger beds and picnic tables for outdoor classes.

"Kids need to understand the origins of what they eat and wear – the whole big picture of their environment," she said. "The garden is the best place for them to learn this."



CRISSY PASCUAL /  
Union-Tribune

Robert Farmer talked to a visiting Girl Scout troop at Tierra Miguel, an organic farm that offers educational programs.

---

■ Deborah M. Schneider is a certified executive chef and author of "Baja! Cooking on the Edge," to be published by Rodale Press.

[»Next Story»](#)

---

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20041103/news\\_lz1f3gardens.html](http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20041103/news_lz1f3gardens.html)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.