

School gardens take Trenton's students from 'yuck' to 'yum'

By **Patricia A. Taylor** - April 28, 2017



Christina Heimann of Isles

‘When I first saw this,’ a Trenton second grader told Christina Heimann as he held up a plump red tomato, “I thought yuck!” He quickly added, “And when I tasted it, I said yummm.”

Heimann has lots of such stories to tell, anecdotes that she has gathered as the community food coordinator at Isles, the nonprofit community development program founded in 1981. While there are no statewide data on school gardens, she feels that no other New Jersey city can match Trenton’s record in this area.

Such a belief is hard to argue against when one considers that more than 90 percent of Trenton’s public schools — from preschool to high school — participate in Isles’ school garden programs. More than 1,000 students are

currently growing and eating the produce from these gardens. Dozens and dozens of volunteers, from teachers to college students to Master Gardeners, are involved. And more than 2,000 vegetable and flower seeds for this year's gardens are being sprouted at the Jones Farm Correctional Facility in Ewing Township.

The bottom line: While it may take a village to raise a child, to borrow from an African proverb, it takes a plethora of organizations to ensure a productive school garden program. And as each child is unique, so too are the school gardens, varying in produce, participation, and supplemental sponsorship. All, however, share basic goals: to engage students in hands on learning following New Jersey Common Core Standards; to bring students outside so that they can better appreciate the benefits of exercise and the diversity and interconnectedness of our environment; and to encourage and promote healthy nutrition.

Isles — which sponsored its first school garden more than 30 years ago — provides guidance on how to develop a garden; materials for raised beds; seeds and/or seedlings; and tools and equipment to prepare the soil. Isles also offers workshops on organic pest control, healthy food cooking lessons for parents, and teacher training on how to link conservation, history, science, math, and even art to the natural world.

“There’s nothing like showing a third grader how lady bugs can eat the aphids destroying their collard greens that brings home the science and balance in an environment,” says Heimann, a Trenton resident who lives at the Westminster Presbyterian Church-affiliated Bethany House of Hospitality on Hamilton Avenue.

As the number of school and community gardens grew over the years while the Isles staff remained limited, outside support and volunteers became crucial and remain so to this day.

In 2013 AmeriCorps, the civil society program founded in 1993, became an Isles supporter under its FoodCorps aegis. The money allowed Isles to hire a staffer to work intensely with selected schools, spending mornings interacting with the children and providing lessons and demonstrations. Generally, the position is for one year. Heimann was the second staffer hired and performed her job so well that her work was extended for another year.



Christina Heimann of Isles tends her Trenton garden.

A major boost to the school gardens program came just last summer when pharmaceutical giant Novo Nordisk donated \$2.5 million to a program called the Community Health Collaborative, of which Isles is a member. The goals match those of Isles: to educate parents and promote physical activity and healthy food choices for grade school children.

With that funding, Isles was able to continue Heimann's recognized work among the school children by creating a new position and hiring her to fill it. "I love working with the kids," she says. "Teaching them how to plant and how some bugs are good and others are horrid brings back memories of my childhood in my grandparents' garden."

New Jersey born and bred, Heimann grew up in Elmwood Park, and while neither of her parents — a graphic designer father and dental assistant mother — gardened, her grandparents had a huge vegetable garden in Paterson.

That time with her grandparents was instrumental in convincing Heimann to major in environmental studies at Ramapo College. In a summer job she developed and implemented a curriculum for the science and nature program at a camp. It all added up to a perfect fit for Isles and Heimann.

Early this spring Heimann sent e-mails to all participating schools describing the seedlings and seeds available and asking if they needed additional soil or maintenance help. If the answer is positive for the latter, Isles usually calls on the Bonner Center at the College of New Jersey. “We’ve had entire classes from TCNJ help with school garden builds,” Heimann says.

Two dates are set aside for plant pick-up or, upon request, for Isles to deliver. “I bring the plants to specific classes,” Heimann says. “In some schools there is only one class involved and in others there are four or five. It really varies.”

“The children are always excited when I walk into the school with the trays of plants. For some, it’s a chance to get out of the classroom, for others there is a real sense of curiosity.”

“Some schools add flowers to their mix,” she says. “Giant sunflowers are really popular. Nasturtiums are also requested, and teachers like to show how these can color up green salads.”

There is somewhat of a disconnect between the school gardens and the community gardens that Isles works with. Generally, school gardens are devoid of students during the summer while community gardens are filled with those seeking vegetable harvests throughout July and August.

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Heimann addresses this in two ways. "The teachers are wonderful," she says. "Indeed, they are the heart of this program. Some schools host summer camps, and the teachers make sure that tending a garden is part of the program. In others, a teacher will return during the summer to make sure everything is healthy and growing."

Heimann adds: "Last summer a family living across from a school garden volunteered to take care of it in return for enjoying the fruits of their labor. That was a definite win-win situation."

The second approach is to plant anything that is cool weather tolerant and grows quickly. "The seeds and seedlings I typically bring to schools include spinach, radishes, collard greens, kale, lettuce, Swiss chard, and peas," she says.

For schools that want more variety, Isles also offers plans that can be harvested when students return in the fall.

While many fall planted greens have survived our recent mild winters, Heimann worries that the subfreezing temperatures this past March will wreak havoc on these plantings. That would be sad but not a disaster. The enthusiasm and tangible results of the program will remain

untouched. “Being part of the Grant School Garden has made me feel special,” one student told her. Another reported, “Gardening was the best school experience I had.”

School gardens then, at least those under Isles’ direction, are more than changing yucks to yums. They not only enrich diets but also the lives of thousands of children. “And that,” Heimann says, “is what makes the work so rewarding for all of us.”

“About 20 companies donate seeds for our gardens,” explains Jim Simon, deputy director of community planning and development. “Many of the gardens wanted starter seedlings and Isles was not able to handle that demand. Jones Farm has a fabulous greenhouse and we asked if they would grow plants for us ten years ago. They were happy to do so then and continue to do so now. This year we will be distributing about 2,000 plants to school gardens and another 18,000 to the community gardens Isles also supports — and all will have been started at the Facility.”

The Master Gardeners have long been enthusiastic supporters of the school gardens. Under the leadership of Janet Sheppard, 11 are currently working at various schools, with more signing up with each passing year. “We garden with the kids,” Sheppard says, “adding an extra pair of hands and teach by doing. We also help organize and buy supplies.”

“And we have a month-long garden story program in the winter,” she adds, “and have donated books to the school library before spring planting begins.”

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