

Lessons from School Gardens in the Upper Valley

By Aurora Coon, Project Associate, UVFSTS

The 13 gardens I visited this summer varied a great deal in size, shape, how they were built, what they were growing, how they were cared for, and how they were used. Some schools have small plots while others have many different beds plus structures to complement their gardens – sheds and amphitheaters and outdoor reading rooms. I saw square beds, circular beds, triangular beds, octagonal beds, and irregularly shaped beds, laid out in rows, clumps and radiating from a center point. There were in-ground plots, wooden raised beds and stone raised beds (yes, beds enclosed by stone walls!), with wire fences, split-rail fences, fishing-line fences and no fences. Some schools grow only two or three crops, while others have every vegetable and herb you can think of, plus things you've never heard of, like purple basil, blue potatoes and rat-tail radish.

It was wonderful to find such diversity. Each garden was different because it was designed to meet a particular school's unique needs. And while some gardens were more successful than others, every garden was enriching students' health and learning, and every garden had something noteworthy to share. Here are nine lessons I learned from the gardens I visited.

1. **Pests are fun learning opportunities:** While many adult gardeners experience frustration when they discover a tomato hornworm is decimating their crop of heirloom tomatoes, kids experience delight in finding pest. When I visited the State Street School's garden at Stoten House, we found several tomato hornworms, and some swallowtail caterpillars munching on carrot tops. The students were fascinated! Everyone wanted a closer look, and children were trying to figure out whether the caterpillars were male or female and asking about what other things they might eat. Some kids took home caterpillars to feed and observe, while others relished in squishing them. I am incapable squishing the caterpillars in my home garden, but these brave elementary schoolers didn't share my disgust. They also weren't recklessly destructive – they were respectful and gentle with the good bugs. My visits to other school gardens confirmed what I saw at the State Street School garden. Even when pests aren't as engaging as caterpillars (no kids want to take home powdery mildew to observe it...), and even when they thoroughly destroy a particular crop, they're still interesting. The problems school gardens experience with insects and rodents and deer and plant diseases demonstrate for students the challenges of growing food, and can inspire them to find creative solutions (like the Weathersfield School students did – they created a reflective fence to deter animals that were eating the veggies in their garden).

2. **The more people involved the merrier:** The responsibility of caring for gardens during the summer (and in other seasons) often ends up falling on one dedicated person. I found that even the most committed school garden champions struggled to keep up with weeds and harvesting when they were doing it alone. The garden I visited that was the most pristinely maintained was at Thetford Elementary School. There, a committee of parents and others share the task of caring for the garden. They are doing a stellar job – I couldn't find a single weed to pull, and the gardens are chock-full of ripening produce. It seems that gathering a larger group together is a great strategy to ensure that school gardens are well-maintained. The most common strategy for summer care was for families to sign up for a week of the summer to weed, water and harvest.

This can work, but seems less consistent than the Thetford system – inevitably someone forgets about their week or runs out of time to fulfill their responsibilities and as the summer progresses, the weeds take over. More people are also important from a sustainability perspective (to keep the garden going and growing over time) and to maximize the impact of a school garden. It takes a whole community – kids, parents, teachers, school nurses, principals, community members, partner organizations – to create and fully use a great school garden.

3. **Summer school & camps are super:** Several school gardens I visited were being used by the summer school program or a summer camp, including the Weathersfield School garden, both State Street School gardens, and the Hartford Memorial Middle School garden. It was great to see students enjoying the produce from the garden and working in the garden during the height of the growing season, and to know that children were regularly enjoying school gardens even though school wasn't in session. Also, the summer school teachers and camp counselors I spoke with all remarked on what a valuable resource the gardens were, and how much the kids loved them. And, gardens with consistent summer school or summer camp involvement were generally better maintained. When school gardens are integrated into summer school or summer camp programs, everyone wins!

4. **Favorite crops:** The most popular vegetables, present in almost every garden, were tomatoes, zucchini, Three Sisters plantings (corn, beans and squash), pumpkins, potatoes, basil, and marigolds. My personal favorite of the vegetables I saw was the rat-tail radish growing in Thetford. This radish grows over 5 feet tall, and produces pretty pink flowers and edible seed pods all summer long and into the early fall. At the Thetford garden event I attended, it delighted the students and adults who tried it with its funny name, interesting appearance and spiciness. Another unique crop that I found especially exciting was millet, which was grown in the Hartford Memorial Middle School garden a couple years ago. Two other less common crops I heard about that I think should be grown more in school gardens are dry beans and garlic. Some vegetables that seemed to be particularly successful in terms of the timing of their harvest were kale, pumpkins/winter squash, potatoes, onions and carrots. Tomatoes, cucumbers and zucchini, on the other hand, peak before students return to school.

5. **Share the harvest:** Most schools I visited share the food they produce with food shelves, and also send produce home with teachers, staff and students. Giving away food builds awareness of the garden, as well as good will towards it. You don't have to give away everything – even schools I visited that were sharing a lot of produce were also saving produce to harvest in the fall when school was in session, or preserving some for their school cafeteria. But sharing the harvest can be a great strategy for supporting the garden, and avoiding waste! Finding appreciative organizations or people to donate produce to is definitely something to consider when starting a school garden.

6. **Connections are key:** School gardens that are successful over time and well known in their communities are connected to annual events and to classroom curriculum. It takes a lot of energy to initiate those connections, particularly when it comes to curriculum, but they are the key to a lasting, vibrant garden program. Thetford Elementary School and Sharon Elementary School have gardens that are very well connected to their curriculums and to school & community events.

7. **Free stuff:** I was very impressed with the many generous donations I heard of that have been given to school gardens in the Upper Valley. At the White River School and at the Pomfret School, parents who are stone masons volunteered to build beautiful stone walls for raised beds that will long out last ones built with wood. Other parents have donated composted manure to fertilize school gardens. Many companies have donated materials and tools. And community members with garden and building expertise have been incredibly generous with their knowledge and time in Sharon, Woodstock, White River and at many other schools. It's wonderful that school gardens are supported in so many ways.

8. **Start small and grow – it takes time:** Starting a school garden takes a lot of energy. Schools that choose to start out small, like the Dothan Brook School, seem to have a better chance of success, because they're less likely to get overwhelmed the first year or burn out volunteers and teachers over time. Bigger school gardens grow over time – the biggest gardens I visited were the oldest (and had built on past successes)!

9. **Gardens are valuable:** I saw and heard first hand how gardens make kids healthier, smarter, more responsible, and happier. Here are some of my favorite examples of how gardens are valuable:

- This (unprompted) quote from a summer camper who'd been visiting the HMMS garden: "I LOVE the garden!"
- A Thetford Elementary Student who surprised everyone by eating five springrolls that he (over)stuffed with carrots, cucumber, radishes and lettuce from the garden.
- State Street School students proudly and excitedly showing me the zucchini they'd grown
- This quote from Pomfret School teacher Sarah Woodhead, who grows pumpkins with her 5th graders: "Kids get so much out of this act of gardening and getting their hands in deep. They become caretakers of the land from doing, not reading."
- This video created by students in Weathersfield (with Mary Ellen Applequist, as a collaboration between Vermont Kids Against Tobacco and the Mount Ascutney Prevention Partnership).

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