

School gardens

School has already started for many children living in southern Nevada. One way that some schools are able to enhance their students' learning experience is by building gardens at the school. These are far more than just an aesthetic improvement to the building and yard; they are outdoor classrooms.

These are places where pupils can learn about their environment, but that is not all. Since everyone learns differently – by reading, by listening, by watching or by doing, – bringing children into the garden provides them with the opportunity to learn multiple subjects in many different ways.



Students from Gibson Elementary School learn about composting on a field trip last May.

Watching a plant develop from a seed is an adventure. Preschoolers easily combine schoolwork and play. In the garden, they learn to count and identify colors. Older children can see the progress of stem and leaf, which teaches them important lessons in patience and helps them to develop their observation skills. When they write down what they have noticed, they are working on their language skills. Because they are in charge of maintaining their plants, they learn to be responsible for something that depends on them.

For some students, especially those who live in urban areas, the garden might be their introduction to where our food comes from. Too often, when asked about this, children say “the refrigerator”; or if they are a little older, the answer might be “the store.” Seeing an edible plant, whether it be lettuce or a carrot, coming from the soil can be a shock to children who are accustomed to neatly washed and wrapped produce. Sometimes they can scarcely believe that a fresh vegetable originates in the soil. They might need to be convinced that it is not dirty and only needs rinsing.

It is difficult to try something new, and for teachers and parents who are not familiar with outdoor education, it can be downright intimidating. Fortunately, much assistance is available. At Cooperative Extension, we have been working with schoolteachers, staff and administrators, as well as with home-schoolers, to assist them in getting their gardens going, as well as using them once they have completed building them.

There are curriculum materials such as “Food, Land & People,” with lessons for students from pre-kindergarten through high school. Junior Master Gardeners™ is a 4-H leadership program that teaches children from third to fifth grades about gardening and the natural world where they

live. Children (and parents) involved in this program also donate a number of hours at community events such as the Las Vegas Wash clean-up.

We host field trips for groups of students at our two garden sites in Las Vegas. These field trips have themes, such as “Equilibrium in nature – how people can help maintain it.” It is exciting to have a hundred children balancing on one foot, or tasting fruit fresh from a tree, or examining the soil.

Not everyone has children in school, but many schools with gardens could benefit from the extras we gardeners accumulate. What are you doing with last year’s seeds? Perhaps some teachers could put them to good use.

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