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“School show off gardens”



School gardens around Hawaii Island are in full bloom, and students and teachers at several school gardens are opening their gates for tours and tastings in April.

On these tours, the public can enjoy produce grown and prepared by the students, teachers, and volunteers, and see how food self-reliance is growing in our communities.

The tours will be April 14, 21, and 28, and are hosted by The Kohala Center, a local nonprofit with an emphasis on education, environment, and empowerment. Lunch is offered on some of the tours.

The nationwide renaissance of school gardens has not bypassed Hawaii, where 85 percent of the food is imported. Sixty-three public, public charter, and private schools are growing gardens and integrating them in many ways, from curriculum to waste reduction. Students, from elementary to high school, engage in hands-on, project-based education, and learn garden-based math, language arts, science, nutrition, and, in some instances, cooking.

“The work these students are engaged in is impressive and inspiring,” said Nancy Redfeather of The Kohala Center and the Hawaii Island School Garden Network project director.

While some gardens are on school property, others are off-site, such as Hua O Ke Ao at the Amy B.H. Greenwell Ethnobotanical Garden, one of the gardens available to tour.

“Our site, Hua O Ke Ao, offers 15 acres of rich agricultural history of Kona and is well developed with hundreds of native Hawaiian plant species,” said Kamuela Naihe, garden coordinator.

This school year, Hua O Ke Ao is open to 20 students in grades 4-12 from four area schools who are learning to grow, tend, and prepare foods such as dryland kalo (taro) and uala (sweet potatoes). The garden also assists in seed collection and propagation of different plant species, some of which are endemic and endangered.

“I’ve tried many different types of kalo because of working in the Hua O Ke Ao garden,” said Jayci Gomes, a seventh-grader. “This program is not only a place where trees grow, it is a garden where different types of people come to grow with the aina and grow as people.”

“Many of these students have very little personal experience with food production, though some fish and hunt,” said Donna Mitts, school garden coordinator at Paauilo Elementary and Intermediate School. “Through this program, they and their families learn skills they can use at home to grow fresh food and get different ideas on how to prepare it.”

School garden coordinators, and in some cases the students, will be leading these free, hour-long tours to showcase their produce and knowledge of cultivating food. No reservations are required.

Courtesy photo: Sophie Smith of Hawaii Academy of Arts and Sciences Public Charter School shows off a fresh chard harvest.