

# Ku Aina Pa paves way to hands-on learning in school gardens

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For many of the 60-plus school gardens in the island's public, private and charter schools, their primary garden teacher is either part time, or teaches the class as a secondary course.

But most teachers, after a short time with their hands in the soil, become passionate advocates for school gardens. They realize whatever subject they teach – math, science, language arts, social studies – translates in a hands-on way into the garden.

Nancy Redfeather, Amanda Rieux, Ming Wei Koh and Betsy Cole hope to harness that energy and multiply it through their Ku Aina Pa teacher training program for school learning gardens in Hawaii.

The pilot program's weeklong intensive training, June 10 through 16, brought together 30 kindergarten through eighth grade teachers from 20 schools throughout Hawaii Island to learn about how to plan, develop and sustain learning gardens at schools. Participants stayed in the Hawaii Preparatory Academy dormitories and took classes both at the HPA Energy Lab and at the Mala'ai Culinary Garden at Waimea Middle School.

"The week was just amazing – it got better and better every day," said Nancy Redfeather, program director for the Kohala Center. "The really exciting thing was how engaged the participants were with planning their own programs for this coming year."

But the weeklong course was just the beginning of the program. When participants apply, they commit to a yearlong study that includes: attending three weekend programs, creating an action research project, working with a mentor and visiting three other school gardens.

During the recent Ku Aina Pa week, classes included: lessons in Hawaiian skills, values and traditions; training in "learning gardens" and in sustainability; a primer in soil biology and gardening with microbes; a review of Hawaii Island agricultural zones; a practical study of linking gardens to school curriculums and writing lesson plans; and learning steps to creating a healthy and sustainable future for food production.

Redfeather said the dream of the Ku Aina Pa team is to build a model that can be replicated and standardized, so garden teachers can be certified.

"I think initially, we wanted to create a cohort of teachers that had received professional training in this area," Redfeather said.

She said that until the Ku Aina Pa teacher training program, the Kohala Center had offered summer conferences and about 15 workshops a year for training, but she felt the training wasn't comprehensive enough.

Ming Wei Koh, who is on the Ku Aina Pa school learning garden team and is also the sustainability garden facilitator at HPA, said she hopes the research participating teachers conduct throughout the year will produce some peer review articles that can be published in education journals. She

also hopes their research projects can be used to instruct future statewide garden teaching programs.

Hayley Blondin, garden teacher for Waimea Country School, called the experience, “energizing” and “inspiring.”

“It was nice to delve further into botany and soil science,” Blondin said.

She said she also learned much from the Hawaiian garden protocols and history.

Wendy Baker, of Hawaii Academy of Arts and Science Public Charter School, said she hopes to do her research project measuring the nutritional values of food grown in organic soil against either food grown in a non-organic environment or food bought from a grocery store.

She said she thought the program was “excellent and pertinent, relevant and meaningful.”

“We are so lucky they had the vision and foresight (to create the program),” she said. “It was really a well-balanced program.”

She said she enjoyed the balance of the work at Mala’ai garden and the availability of technology and training at the HPA Energy Lab.

Eva Conway, a third grade teacher at Kohala Elementary, said for her Ku Aina Pa research project, she plans to tie literacy to the garden. She said this year she will have students gather stories of their food traditions and find family recipes. She hopes to plant the ingredients in the garden. She will publish the recipes in a book for parents, to promote family literacy. Conway also said she will conduct testing before and after the program to chart her students’ progress.

“I think, in general, the big picture that I really want to bring back to the classroom is simple; it is possible for them to grow food and feed themselves,” she said, in addition to family literacy awareness.

Redfeather said that garden learning is not separate from the classroom, but an extension of it.

“Many students learn best hands on,” Redfeather said. “By learning in the outdoor classroom of the school garden, they can understand their inside classroom work.”

For more information on the Hawaii Island School Garden Network or the Ku Aina Pa program, visit [kohalacenter.org/HISGN/home.html](http://kohalacenter.org/HISGN/home.html).