

School Garden Network wraps up first Spring School Garden Tour

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For amateur gardeners and school garden teachers, it was a free opportunity to explore a different garden space and pick up a few tips.

But according to Nancy Redfeather, project director, the Kohala Center's School Garden Network organized the first Spring School Garden Tour to bring schools and their surrounding community together through their garden.

"We wanted the community to really see for themselves what school gardens are all about and what the children are experiencing by having a school garden," Redfeather said.

The garden tours were over three Saturdays in April and visited 15 of the 63 schools on the island. The tour of Waimea Country School's garden, called Na Keiki Aloha Aina, was 9:30 to 10:30 a.m., on April 28. The Malaai Culinary Garden at Waimea Middle School tour explored their three-quarter acre grounds from 10:45 to 11:45 a.m. the same day. The tour also featured Honokaa High School on April 14.

At Waimea Country School, seven students led about 30 visitors through some of the typical activities students work on in their garden during formal classes and their breaks.

Participants learned to make "worm tea," mulch and plant trees and plants, prepare a snack of guacamole, carrots and ginger lemonade.

According to Hayley Blondin, teacher and school garden coordinator, the garden was a "big passion" for her students. The school has been growing their school garden for about five years and it now reached almost 500 square feet.

"I wanted today to be about the students because the garden is about the students," Blondin said. "The garden fosters independence and pride in the students. That is so important for them to have the feeling that they have created this."

Examples of some garden plantings include: a variety of herbs, kale, chard, comfrey, kalo, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, ornamental and edible flowers, borage, lettuce, strawberries and a newly planted mulberry tree.

Karen Emerson, a teacher at Chiefess Kapiolani Elementary School in Hilo, said she joined the school garden tour to get tips as they're starting out their new school garden.

Kim Giffin-Pickard and her husband, Mike Pickard, are from Waimea and joined the Kohala Center to go on the tour. They said they were impressed with the WCS garden and especially the students.

"The kids are competent and confident and (understand they) are stewards of the land," Mike said. "It is very impressive."

At the Malaai Culinary Garden of Waimea Middle School, visitors explored the extensive varieties of herbs, ornamental and edible flowers, vegetables, fruit trees and chickens and examined the two outdoor cooking stations.

Amanda Rieux, program director and garden teacher, gave a history of the garden, reviewed a typical day for students in the garden and discussed her garden philosophy with visitors.

Rieux said the garden attracts community volunteers who are chefs, artists, gardeners, landscapers and other related professions.

“This garden is a place that people from the community can work to share their aloha with the students,” Rieux said.

She said that more than 2,000 students have worked in the garden.

“It is their garden,” she said of the students. “It is their learning place.”

Singer Jack Johnson, and his wife, Kim, joined the school garden tour at Malaai. Johnson was in Waimea to perform two concerts, on April 27 and 28, as part of his Best of Kokua Festival. The tour benefits the Kokua Hawaii Foundation, a non-profit organization supporting environmental education in the schools and community.

“I came to learn and to check it out,” Johnson said. “I am inspired; I really feel the love.”

Johnson’s wife, Kim, said it is important to bring the “education and awareness” that school gardens provide to students.

“We have a unique opportunity to make a difference,” Kim said.

Steve Velonza, school garden coordinator for Hualalai Academy in Kona, said he visited all of the west Hawaii schools on the tour.

“It was good to see each school and what they can provide,” Velonza said. “I got to see what is there and what is going on. It is a great partnership to see how the school, the garden and the community can come together.”