

Big Island Weekly

Plant it Forward

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By Jade Eckardt

A growth spurt of school gardens on the Big Island may seem like a recent trend, but it's a resurgence of something that was once a no brainer in Hawaii's schools. Outdoor classrooms in the form of school gardens were commonplace in Hawaii's schools until the late 1960s, yet somehow student gardens became far and few between for decades.

"I've spoken with so many kupuna who remember working in their school gardens, bringing the harvest to the cafeteria, and eating what they grew," says Nancy Redfeather, Director of the Hawaii Island School Garden Network.



The school garden renaissance of the last decade is doing more than bringing future food security to islands where over 85 percent of food is imported, it's bringing a holistic awareness of health and nutrition to students and their families. What they learn at school translates into the home where the long-term changes happen.

Big Island school gardens are being grown at the broad spectrum of schools on the island. Private, charter, public, and Hawaiian immersion schools all have student gardens, and they circle the island from Ho'okena Elementary to Pahoa High School. While some schools are fortunate to have garden teachers, many school gardens are overseen by volunteers or teachers taking on an additional task. According to the *2012 Farm to School & School Garden Summary Survey*, the majority of Big Island school gardens are funded by the school budget, followed by grants, fundraising, private donors, parent organizations, and lastly, volunteers.

In the last decade, classrooms in the form of school gardens have been rebuilt to inspire future farmers, hands on learning, and nutrition. According to the report *Growing School Learning Gardens: A Summary of the 2012 Statewide School Garden Survey*, there are 168 school gardens involving 21,577 students and 830 teachers on 30 acres of land in the state. Redfeather says the Big Island has the most school garden teachers of any island, with 96 percent of Big Island schools being home to a learning garden. All of the student gardens participating in the report add up to a total of nearly 22 acres, across 53 schools, and 6,202 students.

For decades student run gardens were usually implemented at the local level, but today there's a national movement for school gardens. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is inspiring schools to plant food through its Farm to School Program, which includes research, training, technical assistance, and grants.

“They’re really trying to reconnect kids with the land and the source of food,” says Redfeather. “For a long time school gardens were being installed on a grassroots level, and it’s great that now there’s government strategic planning for them.”

Thanks to a new program called Hawaii FoodCorps, a national AmeriCorps program that addresses childhood obesity and food insecurity in underserved communities, Hawaii is experiencing an influx of school garden teachers. The Big Island’s Kohala Center, a not-for-profit, community-based center for research, conservation, and education, is Hawaii’s host site for the program.

Redfeather, who is also host site supervisor to the program, says eight positions were filled out of over 1,000 applications. “We have to raise up the quality of school lunches, and this program is dedicated to change,” she says.

In late 2013, FoodCorps service members were chosen to work in eight schools on four islands. Selected college graduates are dedicating one year of full-time public service in school food systems, where they will expand hands-on nutrition education programs, build and tend school gardens, and help bring high-quality, locally produced foods into schools.

Kohala Elementary garden teacher Jane Lee secured one of the Big Island FoodCorps spots about six months after moving to the Big Island. “I worked on a few farms here in North Kohala and realized it’s my passion,” says Lee. “I wanted to be part of the food sovereignty movement, and wondered how I could plug myself in.”

A learning garden “Helps students see where their food comes from and develop healthy eating habits,” she says.



Kohala Elementary has two established, fenced in garden areas. Lee refers to one as the “*piko*,” where grades K through three garden. It measures 70 by 80 feet and includes an outdoor garden classroom as well as beds to support the general school gardening program. Children also work with the garden’s three different composting systems. The upper elementary garden is where the older grades grow their crops, and measures 40 by 80 feet. What are the students at Kohala Elementary growing? “Right now we are growing arugula, mustard greens, watermelon, lettuces, turnips, carrots, kale, sunflowers, poha berries, several herbs, pumpkin, strawberries, bananas, and beans,” says Lee.

Lee calls her time with the program “A really positive and rewarding experience. We’ve had a lot of success getting the kids to try new foods,” she says.

“Our principal wanted a garden,” says Lee. “He wanted a place where students could learn interdisciplinary skills and character development, and the garden is a really special place where these skills are possible.”

Redfeather acknowledges the importance of a principal's role when it comes to the birth of a school garden. "It's all about the principal's support," she says.

In East Hawaii, Pahoa's Hawaii Academy of Arts and Sciences (HAAS), has had a large school garden, "Since its inception," says Wendy Baker, garden director as well as seventh and eighth grade history teacher. "Our principal, Steve Hirakami used to be a farmer on Oahu, so our garden was really his vision and because of his support." HAAS currently has what Baker refers to as an upper garden, lower garden, and a greenhouse.

But today, although an ever-growing number of schools throughout the islands are offering up space for gardens, eating the harvest isn't as simple as a garden to cafeteria table transition.

Students do get to reap what they sow, but Department of Education (DOE) standards prevent the produce from being served in the cafeteria. It just takes some creativity to find ways to serve the harvest.

At HAAS, they've come up with a Garden to Grinds concept where students envision a recipe they want to cook before planting. "We actually go backwards, and the students pick a recipe before planting. They sprout the seeds, manage the starts, and transplant the ingredients into the garden. At harvest time we prepare the original recipe as planned," says Baker.

Out in North Kohala, Lee prefers to send the children home with their daily harvest. "Sometimes they go home with a bunch of bananas, and sometimes we make salads," she says.



But the Hawaii School Garden Taskforce, composed of representatives from UH CTAHR, as well as the DOE, Department of Health, Redfeather, and others, is working on the legislative level on allowing school gardens to be served in school lunches.

One effort is HB 478 HD2, relating to the DOE, which would authorize schools to grow food in school gardens for consumption in the school lunch program under specified conditions.

At Honaunau Elementary, garden coordinator Melissa Chivers and FoodCorps garden teacher Jessica Sobocinski send all of the produce home with the students, give it away to families at the end of the week, or use it in cooking demonstrations during garden classes.

Sobocinski, who even maintains a blog about the garden, says, "Students and teachers can observe, interact with, and learn about the natural world that is responsible for supporting our very existence on this planet." At Honaunau, the students grow, harvest and prepare the food in healthy ways. Sobocinski recalls a recent time when a class made pesto using two different types of basil from their garden. At the taste test, the majority of them said that they liked best the pesto with kale in it.

Redfeather notes that hands on learning helps to retain and apply concepts, and says that student gardens encompass many different subjects in schools.

Although student gardeners contribute to a food sustainable future, reconnecting with the outdoors has an immediate positive affect on the present for many students. School gardens help children become genuinely thrilled in working outdoors with nature, something that's becoming increasingly harder to instill in youth in today's world of iPads, video games, and social media.

"While our students fashion mother nature tools from sticks and hunt for the cabbageworms eating away at our kale, they are discovering the value of their own observations, inferences, and their role as caretakers of the earth and growers of not only food, but beauty, medicine, and fun," says Sobocinski.

And this is where school gardens have a positive effect on Hawaii's residents on a level much deeper than the soil they're working with. A program that opens children's eyes to the beauty of healthy organic food is life changing in a state where approximately one third of children are obese or overweight.

Lee acknowledges the effects school gardens can have on the future, both on the island community level as well as the individual level. She says, "It's a great way for the students to see where food comes from, as well as helping them develop healthy eating habits."

Redfeather too sees the long-term effects of a student becoming passionate about gardening. She says, "Anything these children grow, they will eat. It's completely changing the future of food for them."



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