

Planting the Seeds: *The Cornucopia Project Experience*

By Katherine Radune Photos by Kimberly Peck

This past late March, with snow still on the ground, I arrived at the Dublin Consolidated School (DCS) with my Antioch University New England intern, Cat Fletcher, to begin a new garden season.

Regardless of the uncooperative “spring” weather outside, I assured the third-grade students that it was indeed planting time “inside.” After many months of winter, while the garden was buried under a blanket of deep snow, students were eager to begin the seed-to-table process once again.

While planting pepper seeds in pots, I asked the students to name their favorite vegetable. Most students couldn’t limit their responses to just one vegetable, and rattled off at least two or three of their favorites, including kale, onions and tomatoes. (“Though, that’s botanically a fruit,” one sharp student reminded us.) They also added to the list a variety of other vegetables that typical eight- and nine-year-olds may not even know exist, such as Brussels sprouts, kohlrabi and parsnips.

Lorrie Lewandowski, the food service director at DCS, emphatically points out that these young students have profound knowledge and interest in vegetables for a reason: They have hands-on experience.

“Having the garden here at school has a major impact on what these children are eating,” says Lewandowski. “They get to try things that they sometimes don’t eat at home, and when they go through the entire process of planting, caring for, and harvesting their own vegetables, they eat them!”

As the lead teacher for the Cornucopia Project I have seen this scene play out repeatedly when offering students freshly harvested produce during a “tasting” at the end of each class.

In a class of 20 students, whether I am offering carrots or broccoli, most students will have firsts, ask for seconds, and probably even thirds.

The history of the Cornucopia Project

Executive director Kin Schilling began the Cornucopia Project — a nonprofit organization that aims to increase children’s access to healthy food while providing the education necessary for them to make solid choices about healthy eating — in 2005 with a strong desire to curb the rising obesity epidemic and encourage children to



eat healthier food. She has always believed the way to do this is to include children in the growing process, and allow children to develop a relationship with the natural world around them.

Over the past eight years, Cornucopia has built raised garden beds and helped to develop and institute garden programs in a variety of locations in the Monadnock Region.

The organization works with approximately 200 students in Hancock, Dublin and Peterborough, with plans to build garden beds and start programming with first graders in elementary schools in Antrim, Bennington, Frankestown, Greenfield and Temple during the 2013-2014 school year.

How the Cornucopia Project works

The programming that we develop and implement for these projects is modeled after successful garden programs, such as the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, Calif.

Students involved in Cornucopia programming meet with us

Left, Kin Schilling, executive director of the Cornucopia Project, encourages children to garden and eat healthy food. Above: Cornucopia Project children plant a garden.

Lessons: gardening and life

Not only do students have the opportunity to practice skills and concepts learned in the classroom — such as problem solving and critical thinking in real life situations — but there are many developmental and social benefits to Cornucopia programming as well.

“Garden time provides a hands-on opportunity for my students to care for something over time, and experience the satisfaction of watching something grow. It also teaches my class about responsibility and patience,” says Hancock Elementary School kindergarten teacher, Virginia Topping.

“Just as important are the lessons being learned on planning ahead, cooperation and patience,” adds Hancock Elementary first-grade teacher, Karen Lowenthal.

It is no secret that many children are distanced from their food source and can be disconnected from nature, due to a variety of factors.

Our goal, at the Cornucopia Project, is to take the mystery out of where food comes from, and to get children outdoors and allow them to develop a relationship with the natural world.

From my time at Antioch University New England working with place-based education guru David Sobel, and over many years of working in the field of farm-based education, I have seen the profound benefits of allowing children to develop a sense of place. Growing school gardens is one of the most basic additions to a school that provides numerous teaching resources and good food, and gives children a space to learn and play outside the classroom.

How do I judge the success of a Cornucopia Project? Four simple ways: Whether students got their hands dirty, learned something new, had fun, and ate a vegetable or two. So far I cannot recount a day that did not feel successful in the garden, or one when children were not smiling and excited to be there.

First grade Hancock teacher Lowenthal sums up the value of the Cornucopia garden experience: “We recently planted sunflower seeds in our classroom and the children watched eagerly for the seeds to germinate. When the first seedling emerged there was a hushed sense of wonder as we passed it around for the children to see. This type of experience will certainly stick with the children, and cannot be replicated in a book or on the computer in the same way.”

Katherine Radune is a lead teacher at Hancock-based Cornucopia Project. Learn more at www.cornucopiaproject.org.

Reaching All Ages of Gardeners

Cornucopia Project programming is not limited to elementary school children; with the addition of the new Cornucopia Community Garden at the Armory in Peterborough, there are myriad possibilities to reach people of all ages.

Associate director of the Cornucopia Project Joyce Carroll explains: “(The Community Garden) is a teaching and a giving garden. We anticipate that people of all ages will be involved in classes and workshops that utilize this gorgeous new space, and produce will be donated to local food pantries and seniors in need.”

