

Daily Herald

Big Picture . Local Focus

Young sprouts learn their garden lessons well

By Deborah Donovan | Daily Herald Staff

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Cultivating a garden at a school sounds like it would be pretty easy.

You've got the kids; all you need is some dirt and seeds, right?

Anyone who believes this probably doesn't have much experience with either gardening or children.

Anne Nagro of Gurnee has both, and she has started a Web site, www.gardenabcs.com, to encourage others involved with learning gardens to share their knowledge.

Nagro is co-chair this year of the parents group that runs the harvest garden at Woodland Elementary School Wes in Gages Lake. It was started five years ago by Ann Goldbach, the school's principal, and has grown every year.

Last year, the 400 second-graders who morphed into third-graders donated more than 1,000 pounds of vegetables to the Warren Township food pantry.

And that doesn't count the bit they got to eat.

The harvest garden participates in the Daily Herald's Giving Garden campaign that encourages people to donate fruits and vegetables from their gardens -- or the grocery store -- to food pantries and other organizations helping those in need.

Last year, gardeners donated a record 79,297 pounds of fresh produce.

Collections for this year's campaign start June 30.

While Nagro's definition of a learning garden is pretty broad, she is partial to ones where the students -- whether youngsters, senior citizens or anyone in between -- actually work in the dirt.

"For me personally, I think the greatest benefit is interacting with the soil and plants and being responsible for them and having patience and going through that process hands on," she said.

www.gardenabcs.com is an attempt to keep people who are starting or improving a learning garden from "bumping around in the dark."

Anyone involved with a learning garden is encouraged to post stories about their projects, resources they have used and documents such as entire curricula.

Questions are encouraged, and soon there will be some fundraising tips.

Nagro is looking for photos like the one she has posted from the Chicago Botanic Garden's Green Youth Farm Program. Its sites include the Greenbelt Forest Preserve in North Chicago and a few in Chicago.



The Web site serves a role similar to the super-organized Woodland parent whose systems during the garden's early days make life easier for today's volunteers.

You've probably already thought about one large issue this garden faces -- organizing the watering and weeding over the summer when school is not in session.

And sometimes catastrophe does strike, such as when one second-grade class left its seedlings in a sunny window for a particularly hot weekend. Yes, they all died.

That's the time you hope you have a large enough gift card donated by a garden center so you can buy more seedlings.

Some lessons from the garden are obvious -- math, science, and environmental principles.

And there are students who finally understand that food doesn't just come from the Jewel.

"Families that get involved over the summer find it a fun family project the kids are really enjoying," said Goldbach. "They learn about a seed and what it can produce. They also learn how to help their community -- a huge lesson for kids."