

Children in the Garden

By Lisa Ford, Program Associate

UNH Cooperative Extension, Nutrition Connections Program in Grafton County

Summer is a time of year often associated with having fun outside. It is a time when some families take vacation, while others go to the river to cool off on a hot day, or take a hike in the mountains. I haven't taken a vacation, gone in the river, or hiked a mountain, but I am having a fun summer outside.

What am I doing that is so much fun? Gardening!

I do not consider myself a gardener; my thumbs are not green; I grew up in a suburban town; and our yard had grass. Years ago, if you asked me what I thought of when the word 'garden' was mentioned, I would say, "flowers." Now, my answer also includes vegetables and fruits.

I would love to tell you I have a lush garden growing in my yard. I have some fruits and vegetables growing, but not nearly as many as I'd like. I think part of the reason our garden is not too full this year is because of the time I have spent in two other gardens.

My office is located in Plymouth at the Whole Village Family Resource Center, across the hall from Pre-K, which is taught by Sondra, 'Miss S' as she is referred to by her students. The students in her class range in age from 4 to 6. I am fortunate to be able to go outside and garden with my friends across the hall.

There are two garden areas on the grounds at Whole Village. The small garden area is where Miss S' class and I go to tend the flowers and vegetables. Oh, we have some strawberry plants, too. We started planting the garden in spring. Some of the seedlings were started by students. The other vegetables plants were purchased, donated, or grew-up from the compost that was added to the soil in the spring.

In our garden area, the children planted flower seeds. The zinnias and sunflowers are tall enough now, so we can tell the difference between the flowers and the weeds. We haven't seen flowers yet, but the plants continue to grow and there is plenty of summer left. I remain optimistic that we will see the flowers bloom.

In-between periods of rain we bring water to the garden so our plants do not wilt. We will go to the faucet, filling up empty milk jugs, (sometimes getting a little wet) to bring back to the plants. After watering the plants, we take a water break. We nourish the plants and then ourselves.

Another important task when tending our garden is weeding. I have learned that weeding is more of a challenge for those with little fingers. Little fingers have not yet developed the coordination to grasp the weeds- pulling up the leaves and roots together. This is an opportunity for practicing new skills.

This is the first year we're growing plants in our small garden. So far, we have been able to taste strawberries and cherry tomatoes. We are patiently waiting for additional produce to grow and ripen.

The larger garden is the *teaching garden*. This garden gives us the opportunity to try additional vegetables. We have eaten spinach, peas, kale, broccoli, Swiss chard, basil, parsley, and violets! When the peas were harvested all of the students were able to bring some home to share with

their family. Today in the garden, after eating broccoli, one of my young friends wanted to know if they could bring some broccoli home with them.

Children eating vegetables and liking them? Yes, it is true.

Spending time in the garden gives the children many opportunities to learn about vegetables.

-They are able to watch them grow and be part of tending the plants. The children have learned that even though they buy vegetables from the store, they first need to grow in the ground.

-They get to touch, smell, and see that not all vegetables are green.

-They are able to taste vegetables with familiar names.

-They are also able to try vegetables with names they may not have heard of.

-We have eaten vegetables a variety of ways: raw, cooked, or used in a recipe.

When I asked the children what they liked about going to the garden, “picking and eating vegetables” was the number one answer.

One mother loves to share a story about her son who spent time in the garden with us last summer. “I couldn’t get him to eat vegetables at home. After spending a summer in the garden and trying them, he has learned to like them. A year later he is still eating his vegetables.”

Do all of the children try all the vegetables every time? No! But it is a chance for them to try the vegetables when they are ready. One youth was proud to share, “No thank you. I’m not going to have any. I know I’m not going to like it.” After holding onto the Swiss chard for a bit, my young friend asked if he could have more. I have learned that sometimes, just having the kids hold the vegetable peaks their curiosity enough for them to try it.

The students enjoy going to the garden because it is fun. While they are having fun, they’re learning how plants grow by taking care of them. It is exciting to try food from the garden, especially when you’ve helped grow it.

It is an honor to spend time with Miss S and her class teaching them about gardening, watching the joy in their faces as they learn, nurture and enjoy the food they grow. To my friends: Miss S., Allyson, Corey, Dylan, Joshua, Malik, Mathis, Matthew, and Ruby, thank you for a wonderful summer!