

Troy Kids' Garden



When Becca Brokaw opens the tap on the rain barrels at the Troy Kids' Garden, curiosity surrounds her. "So, that comes from the rain from the sky?" one student asks, before toting an orange watering can out to the garden. Less than ten yards from the garden's young sweet potato plants, two simple barrels collect rain water from the corrugated tin roof of an open-air shelter. In addition to filling watering cans, the 55-gallon barrels can be connected to a short hose to water nearby plants, if the water level is high enough. "The kids think it is such a cool concept that we can save rain to water the garden," Becca, who is spending her second summer at the Kids' Garden, reflected.

Becca is one of 14 education interns and volunteers who help visiting students connect to the garden and surrounding natural areas through activity stations such as tending garden veggies, making pesto on the bike blender, digging for worms to feed to the garden's three chickens, fort-building in the nearby forest, creating garden art from natural objects, and climbing trees in the garden's beloved mulberry grove. Visiting students, ages 3 to 14, roam freely among the stations, which change weekly.



"I think the Kids' Garden gives kids a space to be themselves and have fun exploring," Becca told me. "Their days are often so structured, and to have the chance to go about the garden and make the day what they want...it makes it a place they want to come back to."

And they do come back. On the day I visited, almost-sixth-grader Shay was visiting with her summer camp from East Madison Community Center (EMCC). Shay has been coming to the Kids' Garden since the spring of 2014.

Shay told me she has learned to use smaller buckets to water her plants, so that she gives each plant what it needs, but not too much. "I started using that technique at home with my dad, because we have a little garden there, too," she said. Shay also recalled the early spring, before garden waterlines were turned on for the season. "We had to learn to use just a little bit because they had brought the water from somewhere else," she said.

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Leah Kutschke, a group leader from EMCC, said that for most of the students she works with at the center, “being in the Kids’ Garden makes them aware of how much we need water, and how it connects to how we get our food. They also get to learn how heavy water is when we carry it in watering cans to the garden, and are so proud to see and taste the results of their labor.”

Students at the Kids’ Garden also learn how important water is for their bodies. When I asked Shay what she had learned about water this summer, her immediate response was, “that you have to stay hydrated, especially when you’re gardening and you’re sweating a lot.”

In the hot days of July, visits to the Kids’ Garden often start out with group games such as water limbo, water musical chairs, and freeze tag with a sprinkler added in for good measure. Although this water does not make it onto garden plants, the experience of interacting with water in this way helps students relate positively to the garden and want to come back. “It really brings about that fun energy we hope to create, especially because a lot of our students don’t have the chance to get wet every day,” Becca reflected. “It’s something they remember.” These memories, one hopes, will help create lifelong gardeners who relate to water as an important resource for both plants and people.



The Troy Kids’ Garden, which sees over 1000 student visits each year, shines its brightest in teachable moments. The free-flowing structure and low adult-to-kid ratio opens up almost infinite possibilities for student-driven, inquiry-based learning. While watering plants with preschool and elementary-aged students, education intern Tara Coberly has talked about how plants help filter and clean water as it goes through layers of soil. She also helps students understand the relationship between plants and recent weather, through discussions about how much water plants will need after a rain, or in a drought. “The best moments are when you’re able to do your activity, and the kids are so interested that you can teach them more than you intended,” she said.

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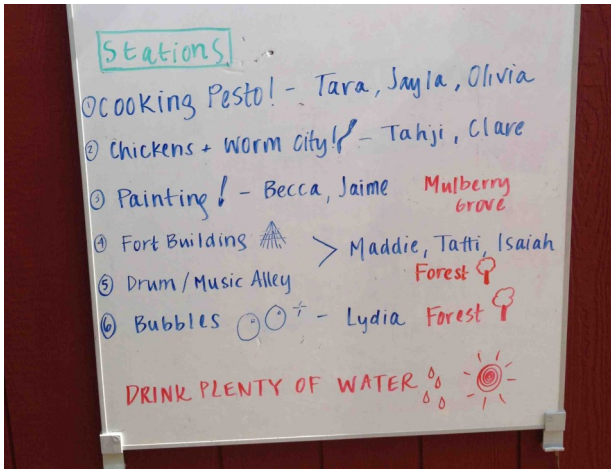


Each summer, the Kids' Garden tries out new water-related projects, often guided by interns' interest and creativity. Last summer, the garden was home to an interactive "water wall" where kids could trace the path of water through the Great Lakes, and pour water through a series of bottles filled with rocks and sand. This summer, Tara and Kids' Garden Assistant Manager Alisha David cut a hole in the bottom of a watering can and attached it to one of the garden's water spigots to serve as a gentle-flow hand-and-veggie-washing station. Underneath the shower of water, there is a large pot full of rocks, which has sparked a number of interesting discussions with kids about erosion prevention. (Tara emphasized that while attaching the watering can to the spigot was challenging, and doesn't look perfect, the kids love it. "One second-grade boy pointed to it last week and exclaimed, 'That's creative!'" she said.)

As they garden, students also receive gentle reminders from staff to help conserve water through simple actions such as going back to turn off the hose before moving on to a new activity. The reminders have rubbed off on thirteen-year-old Isaiah Crabb and Tahji Jackson, neighborhood kids who volunteer to help lead younger students at the garden several days each week. "I think I learned about not just letting the water run, spraying it where you need to," Isaiah said.

Tahji, who used to attend Kids' Garden programs with the nearby Vera Court Neighborhood Center when he was younger, made a comment that made me think about the impact of the Kids' Garden on local kids experience of summer, beyond the topic of water. "Why did you get involved working at the Kids' Garden?" I said. "Well," he shrugged, "I don't have anything better to do, other than play video games, and I don't really like those anyway - I just like to be outside."

Here's to many more summers of being outside at the Troy Kids' Garden!



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