

Success Story: Oneida Nation School District Teaches Culture and Wellness through Gardening and Farm-to-School Programs



For students in the Oneida Nation School District, garden-based education is a link to their heritage.

The high school located in the Norbert Hill Center and the elementary and middle schools housed in the Turtle School host approximately 10,000 square feet of garden space used to grow tomatoes, peppers, herbs, and squash, to name a few. “All are traditional foods that are indigenous to the people of Turtle Island, which is what the land that is now the United States was before colonization,” explains Jesse Padron, Oneida Nation School District Food Service Director. “We also have a Three Sisters garden.” (See introduction for a description of the school district’s Three Sisters garden and resources to help you grow your own!)

Padron has worked closely with Oneida Community Integrated Food Systems Coordinator Bill Vervoort to establish a local garden to cafeteria program and youth educational garden that will provide nourishment, educational opportunities, and a link to students’ histories and cultures. “We are trying to introduce the pre-colonial diet to students in the school,” says Padron. “We are introducing historical diets to our students to focus on healthier food.”

Oneida Nation students also benefit from the reservation’s vast and varied agricultural endeavors, which produce food that is served in the school cafeterias. The reservation is home to a black angus beef farm with 500 head; 175 buffalo; a 40 acre apple orchard with 34 varieties of apples; and gardens that grow squash, asparagus, corn, blackberries, and blueberries.

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“Growing our own food gives us protection,” says Padron. “We were able to serve romaine lettuce that we harvested from our own aquaponics system at a time that other places were throwing out all of their lettuce [due to last year’s E. coli outbreak].”

The program continues to grow, with plans to extend the availability of reservation-raised food to other Oneida Nation institutions. In 2016, the Oneida Nation School District was awarded a grant by the USDA to build an aquaponics project housed in the Oneida veterans property, about one half mile from the school. They have successfully raised tilapia in the aquaponics system, which the school district purchases to serve to students. There are plans to expand the distribution of food raised on Oneida Nation land to include the hotel and casino restaurants that Oneida Nation owns as well as Oneida Nation health services hospitals. “We can market the products that we grow on our own land to our own Nation,” Padron explains.

With such large, reservation-wide projects, the food grown on the grounds of the schools is not integral to the students’ diets. “We thought about not doing a school garden because of all the other resources available to us and the labor involved in doing a garden that size,” muses Padron. “But it was determined that we did want to continue with the garden...It’s part of our students’ education. We are even planning on expanding the garden to include cold weather crops so that we can carry over gardening into the winter months.”

Because education is the primary purpose of the gardens, students are involved from seed to harvest. Teachers in the language and culture departments instruct on how to germinate, nurture, and transplant. In the summer, the garden is tended to by a series of volunteers, mostly parents and grandparents of students.

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“Volunteers come for experiences in the garden and to spend time with their kids and grandkids,” says Padron. Families who volunteer are able to harvest some of the garden’s produce for their own use, and in this way the garden functions like a large community garden in the summer. Come fall, students get to harvest what is left in the garden and use the schools’ kitchens to cook down the garden’s bounty into sauces and pesto to be used in the cafeteria.

In addition to the large garden plot, the school grounds has a maple camp with a new maple shack and boiler thanks to a grant in cooperation with Northeast Wisconsin Technical College. Students learn and participate in the steps involved in harvesting, boiling, and processing maple syrup, all of which is consumed at the school.

Jesse Padron and Bill Vervoort’s hard work establishing such a robust farm-to-cafeteria program in the Oneida Nation School District has been recognized by Governor Tony Evers, who awarded the school a Standing Up for Rural Wisconsin award as the state’s superintendent. And the garden-based education continues beyond the schoolyard. Oneida Nation distributes seeds and seedlings in the spring so that people can grow their own three sisters gardens and uses community gardens as a means of educating and encouraging families to garden.

Padron and Vervoort are also establishing a youth agricultural program, which started this winter. The program, which gives participants a comprehensive education in agriculture and crop sciences is designed for students ages 12-18. Topics range from crop selection and soil testing to traditional medicines and growing traditional foods. The program will serve as both an educational opportunity for Oneida Nation teenagers and a pathway to pass food and agricultural traditions to the next generation. “Young people may see the hard work involved in agriculture and get turned off, but it’s very fulfilling,” explains Padron. “We want them to see what is possible.”



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