

Onalaska Schools: From Seedlings to Salad Bars



This winter, first grade students in Onalaska schools will observe lettuces sprouting up in a rainbow of colors, from green, to red, to freckled. “I want to show the kids how many types of lettuces there are, not just iceberg. Sometimes they’re not sure what to think about the red and multicolored varieties. I tell them, ‘It’s just like flowers - lettuce comes in many different shapes, sizes and colors.’

Seed starting fits in perfectly with the first grade science curriculum and with the district’s Farm to School plan, which is infused with gardens at every turn. Visker visits first grade classes in February for a special lesson on seed growth, and each student plants a few lettuce seeds for their school garden. The seedlings grow indoors for six weeks – each of the district’s three elementary schools have enough grow lights on hand from past projects so they can easily grow as many plants as they need for the gardens.

In April, Visker works with third graders at each school to plant the lettuce starts – along with direct seeded cool weather crops such as radishes and spinach – in garden cold frames. Visker visits each school once a week, and garden work happens for 20 minutes during recess.

“They are completely excited,” Visker said. “Initially, teachers assign kids so everyone gets a chance to participate – sometimes it’s hard to compete with kickball, but mostly they are very enthusiastic. Once all students have had a chance to help, they volunteer to work with me. Usually I have more help than I can use!”

Visker uses Square Foot Gardening to help make plant spacing easy for her young students. A removable grid with 1’x1’ openings goes over each bed at planting, and students receive instructions about how many plants or seeds belong in each square. This allows students to work more independently, so that larger groups of students can participate in gardening at one time.



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This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit www.wischoolgardens.org.



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Near the end of the school year, third graders harvest their crops, which appear in the cafeteria for a colorful “salad bar sampling day” that is open to all students – even those that don’t get hot lunch. In the fall, the salad bar will be full of the warm-season crops—especially tomatoes—that students plant after the spring harvest.

In summer, Visker asks parents to volunteer for half-hour shifts in the garden – mostly watering and harvesting food to bring home. “I think that’s part of the success of the summer program,” Visker said. “The kids just drag their parents there; they want to pick something.” She has also set up a successful communication system, with one point-person sending out reminders to other parent volunteers. One of the goals of Onalaska’s school garden program at its outset in 2010, was to include gardening activities in all of its schools. While the elementary sites all used the same garden model, Visker had to be a little more creative for the upper grades.

At the district’s middle school, recess is shorter, and there was not enough time to tend annual vegetables with students. Visker’s inspiration came after a very successful Farm to Fork Friday, at which she and the kitchen managers observed that a surprising amount of students enjoyed the asparagus sampled that day. At the same time, Visker was experiencing a bumper crop of asparagus from her home garden. “The food service staff said the kids were really receptive to it, and since asparagus is a perennial, it’s something we could plant once and would continue to produce for ten or fifteen years,” she said. Eighth graders “made their mark” on the school three years ago, building a fence and raised beds, and making use of her square-foot grids to plant the alien-looking roots. The project took several Wednesdays, with work groups visiting the space for just twenty minutes at a time. Each spring, sixth graders visit the asparagus bed once a week for maintenance and harvest– including creating climbing-flower obelisks to add beauty to the garden space.

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The district's high school had little room on grounds for an outdoor garden, but Visker and one of the school's special education teachers worked to revive the school greenhouse, which wasn't being used to its full potential. Now, a class focused on career-ready skills raises vegetable and herb seedlings in the space, and hosts a much-anticipated plant sale in mid-May for teachers. Students learn plant care skills in addition to cash-register skills, and earn enough money to re-invest in the project for next year...and have a little party to celebrate their success, as well.

While the district's Farm to School grant ended last year, Onalaska is determined to keep gardens and fresh cafeteria produce growing at its schools. A grant from the Coulee Food System Coalition, a local organization, allowed Onalaska to purchase hydroponic growing towers this November, which have found a happy home in the middle school cafeteria. Visker is currently working on grants that would allow the district to purchase additional growing towers for its other schools, based on the success of the middle school program. "The kids can really see the progress of the plants this way," Visker said. "There are over 600 sixth, seventh and eighth graders who get a chance to see how their food is growing every day!"

Learn more about Onalaska school gardens on their website: <https://sites.google.com/a/onalaskaschools.com/onalaska-school-gardens/home>

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