

Iron County: Bike Blenders, Tech Ed Connections, & School Garden Support



In the Hurley School Garden, the bike blender does more than mix up tasty smoothies and salsa. It gets people talking. Joy Schelble of UW Extension Iron County, who helps run nutrition education programs at the garden, says the modified bicycle provides a place of “humor and community” for all ages and income levels.

“The blender bike creates an opportunity to talk about healthy food and encourage physical activity in a really relaxed way. I noticed that there was a lot more conversation around healthy food if we used the blender bike as the centerpiece of our education,” she said. Assembled bike blenders – such as those from Rock the Bike – are wonderful tools, but can be pricey. So UW Extension Iron County decided to build their own. Partnering with the Northland College Bike Club, they came up with a low-cost design that put together a re-used bike, another bike’s fork, a roller blade wheel, an external-gear blender from a local thrift store, and what Schelble described as “a really long metal screw.”



The bike blender has been a useful tool in UW Extension Iron County’s multi-disciplinary approach to community building, which includes garden-based nutrition education for students, and for food stamp eligible families. Since the federal food stamp program does not sanction bike blenders as a tool for nutrition education, Extension partnered with local schools such as Hurley to host programs. Technically, school staff facilitate use of the bike, while Extension agents do the education around it.

In Iron County, where poverty and unemployment rates are some of the highest in the state, food stamps and the tug-of-war between healthy eating and food insecurity is a topic that can be difficult to talk about. “No one wants to be identified as a person in poverty,” Schelble said. But by using the bike blender in the school garden, “we have a space to talk about healthy eating, and moving through some of the barriers to that. Since there is an atmosphere of fun, the sensitivity is lessened. Humor brings dignity and it brings equity.”

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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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The partnership between UW Extension Iron County and area schools provides programming to students via in-school nutrition education as well as out-of-school time opportunities. In addition to Hurley School, UW Extension assists with school gardens in Ashland, Bayfield, Conduit, and Mercer – which currently uses a neighboring community garden for its students – like a kind of regional garden support network. The bike blender seems to bring it’s magic wherever it goes. “What is so powerful is that it creates this space of education, and I realized it could be so meaningful to... students who may not be as receptive to a lecture,” Schelble said.

At Hurley, many teachers have taken notice of the garden – including the school’s tech ed teacher, who showed up one day asking for building projects for his class. The results were a new shed, farmer’s market cart, and garden gate, all build by students. A second – smaller – bike blender is in the works. The farmer’s market cart is used often by UW Extension’s highly successful Garden to Market program, which also takes place at Hurley. Garden to Market involves middle school students in all aspects of community food system development, from gardening to food preservation to selling food at the local farmers market.



UW Extension has also helped move school gardens forward in Iron County by providing funding for several teachers to attend the Growing Minds course for garden educators, hosted by Community GroundWorks each summer in Madison. “We hope that when teachers come back they will be champions to help move our project forward. There’s a lot of excitement around it,” Schelble said.

Schelble is just as excited about Wisconsin’s school garden movement as a whole, and the support WSGI has helped provide. “It’s exciting to see what’s happened in Wisconsin in the last fifteen years around school gardens,” she said. “I think we’re in a really great place to say, this does improve student wellness, this does improve physical activity, this does blend with education.

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