

# Sparta High School's Tennis Court Gardens



During spring and fall at Sparta High School, food service staff members take regular trips to the on-grounds tennis court, where they pick tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, and other produce for students' lunch trays. Tennis court?

Yes, folks, school gardens can live just about anywhere. There are six tennis courts at Sparta High, and, while old and unfit for rackets and balls, they are the perfect site for raised beds, vining vegetables, and outdoor learning.

The project began when Autumn Grooms, project coordinator for the Monroe County Transform Wisconsin Healthy Food System Grant, was searching for a new school garden site. "We were approached by Sparta High with the tennis court idea," Grooms said, "and were able to get the kids, staff members, and community involved in the planning process. We worked with the nutrition services director from the start, too.

"We wanted the school and community and everyone who uses it to make it functional, and something they are proud of."

During the planning process, Grooms organized a regional garden group to garner advice from other schools, and help plan the Sparta garden. "We talked to people that knew more about them than we did," Grooms remembers. "We learned from them. We contacted Beth Hanna from WSGI, who helped us organize a group of people in the region to talk about school gardens where we found out about best practices, and used many of those."

To keep the project from feeling too overwhelming, the garden planners decided to begin by converting just one of the six tennis courts into a garden during their first year. To keep the kids involved, they had the woodworking class help with the garden layout and build raised beds. Students in the high school's greenhouse class helped plan out what to grow and start seedlings.



*This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit [www.wischoolgardens.org](http://www.wischoolgardens.org).*



# Story Title



This spring, they will begin building gardens on two additional tennis courts. Plans for the new garden spaces include planters for blueberry bushes and an outdoor teaching table with benches. Someday, they hope to grow a tree on that old, green cement.

Bringing life back into an unused area, it seems, is inspiring. One high school student, after many trips with a compost-laden wheelbarrow, got to thinking about the garden's potential: "wouldn't it be neat," he said, "if all the food we grew here, would be all the vegetables in the kitchen?"

Sparta is well on their way. In addition to the tennis court garden, the high school greenhouse also includes a year-round hydroponics system that grows lettuce and tomatoes for the cafeteria. Aquaponics is in the works. "The students are really excited about it," agriculture teacher Eric Follendorf said. "It's awesome when they have that a-ha moment when they're working in the greenhouse – when they realize, 'hey, this is something I could do at home.'" In the spring, many students and community members do go home with plants – the class raises extra seedling starts each year for a school plant sale. Follendorf's greenhouse class meets Wisconsin state standards for agriculture, and is on its way to meeting science standards as well.

In the future, Sparta High hopes to invite neighboring elementary schools to visit the tennis courts, where high schoolers can help teach the younger students about gardening and healthy eating. And, perhaps, that transformations can happen in the most unlikely of places.

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