

# Thomas Jefferson Elementary's After School Garden Program



In the fall of 2013, Wausau crossing guards went home with freshly-made pickles, and local residents opened their doors to bags full of veggies – following a resounding “ding-dong!” and a scampering of feet. The veggies came with a note: “Compliments of Thomas Jefferson Elementary Garden.”

The Ding-Dong-Ditch act was a Pay-it-Forward practice of the Thomas Jefferson Elementary (TJE) after school Garden Club – a way to say thank-you to a community that has supported the school in its efforts to bring Farm to School to life for students through its garden program.

Thomas Jefferson's garden began in the spring of 2013, and found wild success in its first growing season. Renee Heinrich, TJE's science teacher, has been one of the garden's champions since its inception, and has made every effort to utilize the school's 13 raised beds in both her school-day and after school curriculum.

TJE's garden is located in a previously underutilized courtyard – it is quite literally in the center of the school. Heinrich was determined to make the garden a central part of the curriculum as well. All of the school's 385 students study science with Heinrich, and all visit the garden. However, the TJE garden does not stop when school buses show up on the curb at 3:00. For six weeks every spring, and six weeks every fall, Heinrich leads hour-long after school sessions for 20 second and third graders and 20 fourth and fifth graders. These students have become the school's Garden Club, and are proud of their role as “ambassadors to the garden.”

Heinrich uses Farm to School lessons such as those featured in the “Got Dirt?” and “Got Veggies?” garden curriculum guides –or makes up her own– and always keeps things hands-on. “We treat after school as an extension of our school day, and we use Farm to School in that extension,” Heinrich said, “so it's academic but it's also fun. They're trying new things all the time because they know it's



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Photo from <http://scienceschoolyard.blogspot.com/search/label/garden>

a safe environment...it's something they can't fail at, and they are all of a sudden engaged and excited. It gives them ownership and pride in their school and in themselves."

It's no wonder Garden Club students feel a connection to the space. Not only do they have extended opportunities to plant, harvest, and cook with the produce—last year's creations ranged from homemade pizza sauce to "finger" sandwiches with homemade herbal tea—they also use their new knowledge and experiences to educate others. Garden Club students help create the school's "Wisconsin Wednesday" video announcements—which feature the school's Harvest of the Month—and lead visiting adults around the garden during community nights.

Students wear their Garden Club t-shirts to school, and last year's experiences are not soon forgotten. "Our kids who were in the program last fall have already come up to me, saying 'Mrs. H, are we going to have Garden Club again?' They remember that excitement," Heinrich said, "and my goal is to get even more students involved this year."

Heinrich and her students have not been alone in bringing the garden to life, or in celebrating its success. The project seems to be a sort of magnet, drawing in Farm-to-School grant funds, local businesses, parents, and other community members.

Around the time that TJE was thinking of installing a garden, the Marathon County Health Department was awarded a Transform Wisconsin Grant to bolster Farm to School efforts in several local school districts, including TJE's Wausau location. "Within one year, the grant helped the school to create a garden, integrate its use into both daily curriculum and after-school programs, and become a major part of Farm to School efforts," Ashley Kienitz, the Public Health Educator brought on by the grant, said. Kienitz is currently focused on making sure the program is sustainable once the two-year grant cycle is complete.

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The school's efforts at involving the surrounding community, however, have built it a strong base of support as it looks to future years. At the school's Community Nights, Garden Club students act as garden tour guides for visiting adults, and all generations participate in taste testing and other healthy eating activities. The school's May "Plantapalooza" event will also involve Master Gardener Volunteers, who will assist participants in building small container gardens from up-cycled cafeteria cans. For a quarter, attendees can buy plants for their new tiny gardens from Wausau's Majestic Farms greenhouse, which has been raising seedlings planted by students earlier in the spring.

One of the reasons that the TJE garden is such a magnet for positive community involvement is the energy generated by students who are encouraged to use new knowledge to make decisions and implement creative ideas. For example, after learning about rotation farming at the Plantapalooza, students will decide where to plant each type of vegetable. Several ipads – purchased via a Beyond Crans grant from the Wausau Community Foundation – allow students to research the health benefits of different vegetables and plan activities such as "Legume Lunges" for June's Community Night, which will also feature a home-cooked supper for families.

Parent volunteers who previously had little to do with school activities feel welcomed by the garden, UW-Extension assisted with the donation of several grow lights, and teachers from other classrooms are beginning to get involved. From June through August, Wausau's summer school students—who hail from a variety of district schools—will take care of garden.

"We use the garden for pretty much everything we can," Heinrich said. Indeed - everything seems to blend together, with the garden as a Farm to School rallying point. And TJE's after school Garden Club is at the heart of it all.

As Thomas Jefferson looks to the future, it looks to its students. "We have a plan as to where we want to go in the garden, and that has changed based on the kids' interest and creativity," Heinrich said. "Their eyes just brighten up when they walk outside and see something popping out of the ground."

Thomas Jefferson Science Blog, "The Science Schoolyard":  
<http://scienceschoolyard.blogspot.com/search/label/garden>



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