

## Weston's Garden to Cafeteria Program - Seven Years Strong!



Seven years ago, Carl Welke, food service director for the Weston School District, went for a walk around the school grounds. Stopping next to a field full of weeds, he thought, “This would be a great place for a garden.” That day, he called a recent Weston alumnus, and asked if he would be interested in helping plant some corn on school grounds. “I have wanted to do that for so long,” the former student said. Forty-five minutes later, the alum showed up at Welke’s door with a tractor and plow. “Where do you want your garden?,” he asked. Later, Welke went to the superintendent with his garden plans: “I don’t know if I was supposed to do this,” he said, “but maybe you can okay it with the school board.” And Weston had its first garden.

“That first year, we planted our corn with sticks in the style of some of the Native Americans in our region because the soil was so full of root mat you could not use a planter!” Welke said. This fall, students at Weston will bite into garden-grown sweet corn, picked them-selves and served proudly in their school lunch. Also on the school’s Garden-to-Cafeteria menu are sliced tomato vinaigrette, pizza with basil pesto, pasta with roasted tomato sauce, baked squash, and a salad bar with fresh lettuce, radishes, and cucumbers along with a variety of other garden veggies.



Welke is enthusiastic and dedicated about using garden produce in the lunches he prepares – but he is also very realistic. “It’s really hard to grow enough to use in the school lunch program because of the quantity you need sometimes. We can grow beans, but don’t have the time to harvest and prepare the thirty pounds it takes for an average lunch period, and we don’t have the freezer space or time to preserve them. But we use the garden as much as possible – we use it where we can, when we can.”

Now, everyone who was biting their nails about creating a monstrous garden to grow an entire salad bar for every day of the school year - breathe a sigh of relief. “It’s a way to enhance the school lunch – not totally supply it,” Welke says. Supplementing regular cafeteria foods with garden produce is an excellent way to introduce new tastes and add variety; it is education and experience, after all - not volume - that are the main points of

September 2014

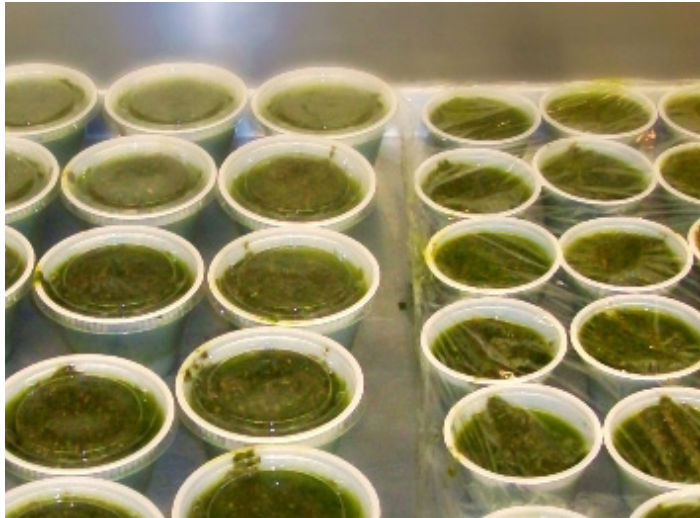
*This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit [www.wischoolgardens.org](http://www.wischoolgardens.org).*



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## Garden to Cafeteria.



Students have multiple opportunities to get involved in the garden. Last spring, middle school students started seeds on Earth Day. Fourth graders planted those seedlings the last week of school, and as fifth graders, they will see the vines and birdhouse gourds on the fence around the school grounds. Students hang the gourds in the school forest and outside classroom windows. Fourth graders planted this year's garlic last fall as third graders, and classes often take on-site "field trips" that blend academic subjects with garden activities. Apples become edible fractions; tomatoes teach plant biology- including what classifies as a "true" vegetable - and melons become conversation starters about social studies. (Did you know China grows the most melons in the world?) Students who complete homework early in study hall also have the option to come out to the garden. "Our rule is you have to have all your work done, and if you get a pass from your teacher you can work in the garden. Some kids work hard so they can earn that, because they love it," Welke said Even the football team gets involved – last year the garden's bumper crop of baby watermelons were set out at the edge of the garden with cutting boards, ready for hungry players at the end of practice.



Because Weston students are so involved in the gardening process, says Welke, "they learn where their food comes from, how it's grown and harvested. When you pull it out of the ground, wash it off and eat it, you are more connected to it. We love to take kids down to the garden and cut a kohlrabi or a melon and slice it up and eat it, right in the garden." And, when students know more about their food, they are often more willing to try new foods. This spring, elementary students glued over 1,200 spinach seeds onto newspaper strips to plant in the garden as seed tape. "Kids don't like spinach that much, but these kids, they wanted to check their spinach every day," Welke said. "We mixed it in with our tossed salad, and they tried it. They may not all enjoy it or eat it every day, but they tried it!" He puts up a 'Fresh from our Garden' sign when he uses garden produce, so students know where foods come from. After seven years, Welke also believes that a willingness to try new foods can become a part of the school culture over time. "I think the students

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here are a little more adventurous because they help grow it and we've been at it so long," he said.

For those wondering about food service logistics, multiple pathways seem to be the key. Welke is able to prepare some foods – such as pesto and pasta sauce – when the garden yields in abundance, and freezes them for later use. Many summer-ready crops – such as sweet corn – are planted later than recommended, in hopes of a fall harvest. Weston has a greenhouse and hoop house, where they grow some veggies in the winter and early spring, respectively. Lighted shelves grow lettuce in classrooms and strawberries grow in eave troughs in the greenhouse. Most importantly, Welke remains flexible, knowing that the garden will perform differently each year. (This year's cold, wet spring weather, for example, led to what he described as an "epic failure" of the melon crop.)

In addition to the extra work that he and garden manager

Steve Gilbert put into the garden program, Weston is able to maintain such a large garden because the school district connects the community to the project whenever they can. A school bus driver with a rotavator tills the garden each spring and fall. Agriculture students help with machine repair and laying the plastic and drip tape used in the gravity system that captures water from the bus garage roof. When a staff member's mother sold her farm, he arranged to dig up her 100-year-old asparagus patch and move it to the school. "He just loaded the roots and a ton of dirt onto a trailer and delivered it," Welke said. Several years ago, community members were able to buy a fruit tree to donate to the school, which now has a collection of apple, pear, and plum trees. In the summer, the garden becomes a small Community Supported Agriculture operation – selling just enough produce to provide money for seeds and supplies, and a small stipend for a summer garden manager. In the past food has been taken and donated at local senior centers and this fall, the public is invited to make a stop at Weston for a school garden lunch during the Fermentation Festival.

While some schools, like Weston, have the space and volunteer power for a two-acre growing project, Welke doesn't necessarily advise scaling up. "It's a lot of work," he admits. "Keep it small, grow what you have space for, think about when it's going to mature, who's going to be around to manage and pick these crops in the summer, and how you can use it in your program. We try to involve everybody as we can - the community, students, faculty, county extension agents, local master gardeners, and nurserymen, even right down to local farmers who save us composted manure."

With a focus on student learning and first-hand experience with food, no Garden to Cafeteria program is too small to have a big impact. Even if a garden only has a few leaves of lettuce to deliver, students are still likely to beam with pride. And you won't have to worry about extra delivery fees or high prices – the commute is short, and enthusiastic smiles are regularly accepted as payment.

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