

Creative Learning Preschool & Childcare Center



Every Wednesday, the Dane County Farmer's Market sets up shop on Martin Luther King Boulevard, between City Hall and Monona Terrace. Shoppers include local restaurants, college students, state employees on lunch breaks, and...toddlers. Outfit with buggies and hand-holding ropes for safe travel, students from Creative Learning Preschool and Childcare Center (CLP) listen to the cheese vendor talk about his cows and the honey seller describe her bees. They visit the vegetable stands, where Susan Rodin and other teachers ask questions to get students thinking: "What letter does this start with? What color is it? Where do you think this came from? What do you think this will taste like?"

CLP's weekly visits to the farmer's market tie in to a school-wide Farm to Table program that started with a hedgerow near the playground, and grew to include five garden beds, fresh garden produce in students' lunches, and even an indoor play farmer's market.

Rodin, who has worked at CLP for over twenty years, describes the garden program as an ever-evolving story. "Our first crop was to plant sunflowers in among the hedges," she said. "We wanted to plant something that the kids could help with. Those sunflowers were tall and gorgeous." That was over ten years ago. The following year, the hedges were removed during a playground remodeling. The hedge was never replaced. "The teachers just took over," Rodin said, "They planted cherry tomatoes, zucchini, basil, and green beans – they picked low key crops that they kids could pick and eat, just by reaching through the playground fence."

Several years ago, CLP added three raised beds in the playground itself, to give students full access to part of the garden all the time. These beds hold an abundance of herbs and snackable veggies. "When the kids first found out that they could just pull off a leaf from the herbs and eat it," Rodin recalled, laughing, "they ate them all! For a while we had a garden full of all these stalks. But that's why we do it - they really see where all the 'green stuff' comes from. If they plant it, and grow it, and water it, there's a much better chance for them to try it."

June 2016

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



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Students also visit the garden with their classrooms, and each teacher incorporates garden education in a way that works best for the age they teach. Families are also invited to visit the garden to harvest and take home produce at the end of each day when they pick up their children. Any produce that isn't eaten directly is sent to the school kitchen, and ends up as part of lunch.

On the garden's longevity at the school – over ten years and counting! – Rodin sings the praises of all the teachers who have been involved over the years. “ Even with staffing changes there is room for positive growth as it is when new staff join the program that they bring fresh ideas to the school gardens.

Like so many gardeners – and so many educators – Susan Rodin seems ready to go with the flow, and solve problems as they come up. Playground beds, for example, have become very compressed due to students walking on the soil. This year the school plans to put low fences around the beds so the kids can still reach in to plant and pick, but to reduce walking in the garden. In the toddler area, the school will install a special place near the garden for young students to simply dig in the soil all season long, without disturbing plants. “It's all a work in progress,” Rodin says, “if it doesn't work, we try something new!”

This year, the school has a huge challenge – and potential opportunity. The building where CLP is located is home for one of the only childcare centers in central downtown Madison. CLP has the option to buy the building if they can raise the down payment by August 31. If the building sells to a new owner, they will likely have to relocate, leaving their gardens and weekly trips to the farmer's market behind. They have begun a Capital Campaign to buy the building. To learn more about how to get involved visit: <http://creativelearningpreschool.org/donate/>

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