

Success Story: Growing Oshkosh

Families Flourish With the Help of Garden-based Education



Growing Oshkosh, a non-profit urban farm that supports school garden programming in Oshkosh, firmly believes that food brings people together. The organization's primary work includes establishing and maintaining gardens and programming at local schools, as well as providing garden-based education at their own farm. But Growing Oshkosh's work extends beyond the bounds of the school day. With family-oriented workshops throughout the winter and weekly family nights during the growing season, Fox Valley families are learning about gardening, nature, and, of course, tasty vegetables – together.

One of the ways Growing Oshkosh engages families – and the greater Oshkosh community – is by making the produce from the school gardens the organization supports available to anyone. “Anyone is welcome to harvest from the gardens, so they provide fresh, healthy food for the community,” explains Jennifer Sattler, Youth Program Manager for Growing Oshkosh. Through these gardens, the organization can provide local families with the perfect balance of guidance and autonomy. Growing Oshkosh sends weekly email updates during the growing season letting families know what vegetables are ready to harvest at their various gardens across the city. The emails also indicate what the vegetables look like and how to harvest them so experts and novices alike can enjoy the school gardens' fresh produce. This makes for a more inclusive garden experience and helps to increase confidence in kids and adults less familiar with what the gardens have to offer while providing access to fresh food.

“A lot of parents are excited to have a space where they can interact with their kids in a garden that they're not responsible for,” Sattler observes. “It



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still has all the benefits of being able to eat food fresh from the garden that they may not have been able to try before.”

In their quest to broaden the reach of garden-based education and include Oshkosh residents of all ages, Growing Oshkosh has learned that effective garden-based education can take many forms. Some people may enjoy an art project, game, or lesson more than digging in the dirt. For families seeking more structured programming, they offer monthly workshops in the winter and weekly Tuesday night programs in the summer. The programs are timed to work around many families’ work and dinner schedules.

These events go far beyond weeding and harvesting. Last summer, an aphid outbreak in a hoop house was the perfect opportunity for a lesson in beneficial insects. Apprehensive parents watched on as their kids helped to shake 9000 ladybugs loose in the hoop house. Parents and their children were able to grow comfortable touching insects – and even grew to think of them as friends. The experience encouraged return trips to the garden to see if the ladybugs stuck around. And this month, 5-6 families will learn about pollinator recruitment while building their own mason bee hotels.

Still, the most memorable moments can come when the programming is over, the vegetables are harvested, and the parents and kids let their imaginations run wild among the flowers, vines, and vegetables. Weekly visitors watch in awe as mammoth sunflowers grow toward the sky. Families run under them, pretending they are giant showerheads. And when the time comes to harvest the flowers, they learn together that the seemingly benign giants have spiky hollow stems.



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Wandering through the garden and harvesting fresh vegetables – or learning together about beneficial insects – can be a great opportunity for family bonding after a long day of school and work. But family time in the garden can have broader implications, as well. “The biggest take away from family events,” says Sattler, “is that it encourages families to think about food together. Parents see their kids wanting to try new vegetables. Parents learn about new foods side-by-side with their kids. Families develop a sense that food is communal. By choosing, prepping, and cooking vegetables together... meals become less top-down where parents make dinner and kids eat what they’re given.”

You can learn more about Growing Oshkosh at www.growingoshkosh.org.



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