

Little green thumbs

Albert County kids take to the garden

by Janet Wallace

In school yards and cafeterias in Hillsborough and Riverside-Albert, New Brunswick, children are having fun while they learn how to grow vegetables and prepare healthy meals. The projects fall loosely under the umbrella of Foods of the Fundy Valley (FFV), a non-profit organization that promotes local food production and consumption in rural Albert County.

"Garden club is awesome," I overhear a Grade 5 student telling his friend.

As a volunteer, I am glad to know the kids enjoy the activities we plan. On a deeper level, I am heartened by their enthusiasm. It gives me hope for the future.

"It's eye-opening for the kids," says Mindy Liptay, a FFV volunteer, about the gardening project at Hillsborough Elementary School. "The kids really like seeing how a tiny seed that they have planted turns into food they can share with their friends."

The programs are simple and effective and go beyond "win-win" scenarios. Volunteers, students, and, it is hoped, society as a whole can benefit. The students learn to enjoy being active outside, and how to prepare tasty meals from local vegetables. They work as a team, helping each other in the garden and cafeteria.

"We need to teach children about where their food comes from," says Liptay.

The also get exercise and a chance to connect with nature. How they connect can be mixed every time an insect is encountered. A June bug can elicit comments as diverse as "cool" and "careful, don't hurt it," to "gross" and "let's kill it."

What follows is a description of our modest initiatives in Albert County, in the hope that this may encourage other communities to start their own programs and, later, share their success stories.

HILLSBOROUGH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The Little Green Thumbs garden club meets at lunchtime once a week in the

spring and sporadically in the fall. The first year (2012), students started seedlings in flats; these were then moved to Farmer Brown's Greenhouse, a nursery business run by Lisa Brown, chair of Foods of the Fundy Valley. The plants were brought back to the school when they needed to be potted up. Later, students transplanted the vegetables into Lisa Brown's fields. A few students maintained the plants over the summer and many came out for harvest in the fall.

The elementary students have since created garden beds at their school. They made raised beds using straw bales as walls and filling the space between bales with compost. In addition to the school vegetable garden, the students planted flowers in civic gardens and at the nearby nursing home.

The highlight of the Little Green Thumbs program is the Harvest Feast. Students prepare a meal made with their garden produce and serve lunch to the entire student body. Liptay says last year some students were so excited to serve their friends that they didn't even sit down and eat themselves. One student exclaimed, "It was awesome to feed our friends from food we grew and made." Another added, "It was so much fun to eat together," adding that she wished they could do it every day.

Lisa Brown says one benefit of the program is a boost in self-esteem. "The kids were so proud of what they grew. When you know you can feed yourself, you get a sense of empowerment."

CALEDONIA HIGH SCHOOL

School gardening is incorporated into the curriculum at Caledonia High. Science students have planted and maintained "living walls" – vertical surfaces embedded with plant containers. The Grade 7 and 8 science class has also worked on the raised vegetable beds outside.

Hard at work at Hillsborough Elementary School. Teachers, parents, and volunteers help students learn where food comes from by growing it themselves.

(Janet Wallace photos)





In a high-tech twist, students were encouraged to create landscape designs for the school courtyard using Google Sketchup. Although the adults were hoping for vegetable plots in the designs, the students had other priorities – places to “hang out,” and ornamental gardens that could serve as a backdrop for prom photos. The school and garden club followed the students’ lead, but integrated edible landscaping into the courtyard. For example, vining plants are trained to grow over the pergola to provide shade and for snack food.

RIVERSIDE CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL

In Riverside-Albert, a garden club was started in spring of 2013. Every Wednesday at noon, students from kindergarten to Grade 5 were welcomed to drop in and help with the garden club. More than two-thirds of the student body of 50 often turned out. A small garden plot that had been used several years earlier was resuscitated to create several new raised beds.

Some plants (greens, tomatoes, peppers) were started inside and eventually transplanted outside. Potatoes, squash, pumpkins, carrots, herbs, edible flowers, and more greens were direct-seeded outdoors. On the major planting day, volunteers worked from 9 am to 3 pm. Whole classes helped in the garden. Another day, the Phys Ed class helped dig garden beds. In summer, volunteers maintained the gardens and harvested vegetables for the local food bank.

Multi Shelter Solutions, based in Ontario, donated a greenhouse to the endeavor. The frame was erected in June and plastic will be installed early next spring. The greenhouse will be used to start plants and to act as an outside classroom. Produce from the greenhouse will be donated to the local food bank.

One volunteer said, “I think having kids involved in growing their own food is important so that they realize that the crap food they’re going to be exposed to as they get older is just that: crap.

“If you’re never exposed to the good stuff,” she added, “you’re not as likely to appreciate it, or even look for it later in life.”

This fall, students were given many chances to taste the garden produce that

The Macdonald Movement

The school garden at Riverside Consolidated is not a new idea. Just after 1900, the Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick donated \$5,000 (a quarter of the total cost) towards the school’s construction, with a condition. Riverside Consolidated had to “provide manual training, household science, and nature work.” Each student was responsible for maintaining his/her own garden that was 36 square feet in size.

The school was built in 1905 in what is now Riverside-Albert. The small village is 50 km south of Moncton and 27 km north of Alma, the entrance to Fundy National Park.

Riverside Consolidated School was part of the “Macdonald Movement,” an approach to rural education espoused by Sir William Macdonald, a Montreal tobacco manufacturer and philanthropist.

The idea was to create large schools that brought in students from surrounding communities (thereby consolidating the smaller schools). The curriculum differed from that in urban schools. Students at the consolidated schools learned practical rural skills and each was provided with a garden plot.

Macdonald provided funding for the establishment of consolidated schools in Middleton, N.S, Kingston, N.B., and Hillsborough, P.E.I. The movement was short-lived largely because it was difficult for students to travel to school in the winter and only the wealthy could afford to board their children in town.



This student “gives it all she’s got” at Hillsborough Elementary’s garden project.

Starting a school garden

If you're interested in starting a school garden, here are a few tips.

- *Find volunteers.* Volunteers can represent a diverse cross-section of the community – some with young children, others with grandchildren, and some who don't have kids. They may be unemployed or have full-time jobs, while others are retired. The key is that all of us want to build a healthier community.
- *Talk to the school.* Try to find allies at the school. It is great if the teachers can incorporate aspects of gardening into the curriculum. Also, teachers might be willing to help maintain plants kept inside the school.
- *Develop a plan.* For many rural schools, students are bussed to and from school so the best time for a garden club is during the lunch break. Pick a site to break ground, and decide on crops. Keep in mind you want plants that are harvested before summer holidays, such as greens, and other crops that can be easily maintained throughout the summer and harvested in the fall, such as tomatoes, greens, potatoes, squash, pumpkins, and carrots. Wooden frames on raised beds make it less likely that kids will walk or kneel on plants.
- *Get going.* At Riverside-Albert the garden club was started by only a few, and after one planning meeting. We brought our own seeds, compost, and tools and started planting. Eventually, we applied for funding and assistance to help us acquire more tools and expand the gardens. One great ally is the United Way Day of Caring.

was being used to create meals. Students, volunteers, and teaching staff worked together to prepare green tomato – apple mincemeat, kale chips, vegetable soups, applesauce, and pumpkin tarts. Some foods, such as applesauce, were frozen for use throughout the year in the free breakfast program.

Lynne Greenblatt, an enthusiastic volunteer, says, "I think it's important to get kids in touch with 'real' food, i.e. nutritious, fresh, and tasty... as early as possible. It was gratifying to see their excitement when we made applesauce with apples from the trees at the school." Starting in January, the Grade 5 French class will learn how to cook nutritious dishes while practicing their French vocabulary. Locally grown ingredients will be used as much as possible including *salade* from the school garden.

Beyond the work and planning, keep in mind that a school garden is fun. The enthusiasm of the kids is infectious. Nothing prepared me for the excitement of the kids when they tasted their first crop – simply raw kale leaves. They devoured bowls of raw kale and raved about it. That's a small step towards a healthier future.

"It's not a perfect world but we do what we can," concludes Mindy Liptay.

(Janet Wallace lives in New Horton, N.B.) ●

United Way Day of Caring

Throughout Canada, the United Way runs the Day of Caring program. For one day, a team of corporate volunteers provides work to community projects. In our school gardens, Day of Caring volunteers helped double-dig sod to create new garden beds, build wooden frames for raised beds, make a cucumber trellis, and erect a greenhouse. The program provides supplies as well as free labor and great enthusiasm from the urban workers who get to come out to the country for a day.



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