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GREENEST CITY GARDENS

The New Farm School

Changing the conversation around school gardens

By Heather Neale Furneaux

Picture this: It's a balmy Victoria evening in September. You're still wearing flip-flops and a T-shirt, biting your tongue as relatives across the country post shots of preparing for snowflakes and Sorels. Your kids happily mill around the field outside their high school after basketball, soccer, or dance practice. They're still basking in the novelty of being reunited post summer vacation; it hasn't hit them yet to complain about their course load.

Waiting for them, you meander through the school garden, glimpsing delicate white and lavender nodding onion flowers and the vibrant red of kinnikinnick berries or turning over late-blooming woolly sunflower leaves in your fingers, marvelling at their velvety feel. You appreciate knowing what all these plants are called thanks to interpretive signage indicating their names in both English and Lekwungen, the traditional language spoken by the Songhees and Esquimalt nations, on whose land we Victorians work, live, and dream. Quickly scan the QR code with your phone and you'll be able to hear the Lekwungen names of each plant spoken aloud by the world's last fluent speaker, Songhees Elder Dr. Elmer Seniemten George. And, if plans evolve as hoped, you might even hear a story about what was happening in this spot before contact.

This spontaneous on-site learning is compliments of an exciting pilot project called Harvest for Knowledge, the brainchild of Sarah Rhude, Aboriginal arts and culture facilitator with school district 61, and supported by Aaren Topley, the capital region community animator for Farm to School BC. Funded by the Horner Foundation and Farm to School BC, there are seven schools involved so far, including Colquitz Middle School, Reynolds Secondary, Vic High, Port Renfrew Elementary, and Gulf Islands Secondary. At least 15 more schools have requested to take part.

Early in the planning process, Esquimalt Hereditary Chief Edward Thomas was brought on as cultural liaison and official translator. His role was to record audio versions of each indigenous plant name and share pre-contact stories in both languages, an add-on feature he contributed himself. The goal is to situate visitors in the larger context of the land—help us see not just the geographical significance of where we stand but also how it fits into a much larger cultural and historical narrative. The plants themselves tell a story about our relationship to the land and each other. This project is meant to enhance our reception of that message.

PHOTOS: PATRICK GAULEY GALE

"We arranged blessings of the school gardens with some of the community Elders and students, so the ancestors [would] know the land was being disturbed in a good way," says Topley. The signage will be interpretive enough in nature that if a teacher happens to move schools, students and staff will still know what's there in that garden, and what it all means.

That tailored approach to learning and gardening seems to define the whole philosophy behind Farm to School BC. According to provincial manager Richard Han, "It's important to really listen and connect with the people on the ground." The non-profit organization now has four hubs across the province: Vancouver; the capital region, which includes southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands; Kamloops; and, most recently, one dubbed "Nanaimo North." Each hub takes on projects custom made for their respective climates and surroundings, with the help of community animators who support their visions, connecting them to funding and key people who can help.

"As long as kids are learning how to grow food, we are on the right track," says Han, noting the differences in scope across regions. In Kamloops, animators and project coordinators might focus more on microgreens due to the difficult growing conditions, for instance, whereas the capital region already has a strong local food culture and can take things to another level. "Our animators place the people at the centre of what they do and help them achieve their individual goals," says Han.

Their focus, thanks to financial backing from the Public Health Association of B.C., the Provincial Health Services Authority, and the B.C. government, has been on producing healthy local food, facilitating hands-on learning, and fostering a strong sense of school and community connectedness.

Harvest for Knowledge is just one of many innovative projects in our region funded in part by Farm to School BC that's changing the way students and staff interact with culture and history, as well as how they understand and navigate their local food systems.

SOOKE

Entering the lobby of Edward Milne Community School in Sooke, it's hard to miss the colossal grey whale skeleton suspended in the air overhead. The haunting-yet-hopeful frame acts as a physical reminder that stewarding our land and waters consciously and ethically, protecting the environment, and

honouring Indigenous ways of knowing are all critical to our collective spirit—and survival. Patrick Gauley Gale, the school's food studies teacher and applied skills department head, bases a large part of his professional approach on these big-picture foundations.

"Last May, [our environmental studies class] headed out to French Beach with the [Saseenos Elementary School] nature kindergarten class to cook salmon over the fire and do some drumming," says Gauley Gale. I can picture the rocky shore framed by windswept conifers as he speaks, having camped out there often with my husband and kids over the past few years. We even caught a glimpse of an orca pod passing through last August.

"We looked at the beach and forest as part of our environmental studies curriculum," he says. But the experience became so much more for their group than comparing ecosystems. Planning activities for both the little kids and the high schoolers resulted in some positive reciprocal mentorship. "The K's modelled enthusiasm and often came more prepared for these kinds of excursions than the older kids," says Gauley Gale, "and the high schoolers would often be more accepting around the little ones."

Over the phone, Gauley Gale sounds humble but excited. He spent a good portion of this summer travelling rural Canada with his family, watching cheese curds being made, holding 25-pound lobsters in his hands, and attending conferences like the Place-Based Food Systems one in Vancouver this past August. He loves watching students become more conscious of what they choose to put in their bodies and learn the importance of local growing. They gain respect and appreciation for the cultural implications of land use along the way and, according to him, quite often gain a deeper sense of personal responsibility and connectedness to community.

"The students would sit down and come up with a menu specifically geared to building stronger relationships," he says. Peers who might feel alienated at school—like international students attempting to operate in a second language or kids who might not "fit in" for one reason or another—were included because of these strategic menu plans.

Just as impressive as this conscious inclusion is the scale of food production at the school. The culinary arts students produce roughly 500 to 600 meals a week, including 80 salads composed mainly of fresh produce Gauley Gale's foods class plants and harvests on site with some recent help from environmental science students and the Saseenos kindergarten class. The school has its own greenhouse, as well as irrigated raised garden beds and an ethnobotanical garden. This year, robotics teacher Jeremy O'Shea is talking about having students build a closed computerized grow system for starter seeds to help with garden expansion, while Gauley Gale's sustainable living class plans to partner with students from a permaculture design course at UVic to grow their ethnobotanical garden in an even more sustainable, lower maintenance way.

While this particular partnership is new, Gauley Gale's method of experimenting with novel learning strategies is not. "The course is connected with the community and the environment, so it can't be the same every year," he says. One year, they plant garlic bulbs with the neighbouring kindergarten class in the fall and try out maple tapping in winter. Another year, they focus on apple pressing or service-oriented activities like beach clean ups. The result: these students are learning to become more aware of their surroundings and can adapt to the rhythms of the natural world and the people in their own backyard.

"The community really sees these students making positive contributions and they are highly enthusiastic about the kinds of things we do here," says Gauley Gale.

Learning about the opportunities these students have enjoyed, I begin daydreaming about what my own three daughters—aged five, three, and one—will one day get to experience. The possibilities suddenly seem endless. And perhaps I can be a part of those experiences in some way, too. One mom I spoke with must have had a similar thought, because the moment she set foot in her new home on the Gulf Islands, she began making waves.

SALT SPRING

Robin Jenkinson spent the last 20 years of her life working as a professional ecologist dedicated to facilitating healthy storm streams. So, when she and her husband decided to relocate from Portland, Oregon, to Salt Spring Island to raise their young children, she jumped right into another stream of service: building school gardens for the community.

"When my daughter [Bryn] started pre-school, we applied and got a grant for a pre-school garden project," says Jenkinson. "A group of us joined the PAC when she started kindergarten. We organized monthly work parties right away." With Jenkinson's passion, tenacity, and pragmatic approach, she was instrumental in creating both these school gardens in just a couple of years. "There was a lot of discussion around having planning meetings to discuss our approach," she says, "and I just said, 'Well, let's just get out there in the meantime and clear the weeds for starters.'" Her eagerness paid off.

"The way these gardens have worked out, they are as much a nature playground as they are a place to grow food," says Jenkinson. The first thing the team did was install a sandbox where their kids could play while they worked. The children ran along rammed earth walls and jumped on hay bales, keeping themselves busy and happy while things got done. It became a kind of interactive, multi-generational social space. "Gardens won't survive without community," she says. Since then, Jenkinson and some other equally dedicated parents have branched into even more large-scale projects.

"A couple of us got totally obsessed," she says with a laugh.

They began reading up on all sorts of initiatives taking place across the continent: Columbia University macro studies on how to sustain gardens across New York State, Guelph University school garden design philosophies, and grassroots developments in major Canadian cities like Toronto and Vancouver. "It's a national and international movement," says Jenkinson, who is currently hard at work creating a database of contacts and resources for all to use.

She and an enthusiastic school parent team, including Toby Carson, Katharine Byers, Shelly Johnson, Julie Johnston, and Jenny Redpath, first built a website for the Gulf Islands community complete with resources and an updated blog (**schoolgarden.ca**). They are currently developing a "growing calendar" with seasonal lesson plans. "We've looked at several examples of this kind of thing, and taken our favourite parts, modifying here and there, and adapting it for this culture and this place," says Jenkinson. "It's been a great way for me to connect with my daughter."

I know this feeling first-hand. I've greatly enjoyed bonding through gardening with my two older girls now that they've gotten far enough past the "toddler" stage and I can turn my head for several moments at a time without worrying anyone will seriously injure themselves.

Salt Spring Island School District is the first in Canada to have a school garden in 100 percent of its schools—quite an accomplishment considering the volunteer hours required to make them possible in all 11 schools. Jenkinson was quick to mention "Chef Mark" Kilner as a key leader in the region. Kilner runs the culinary arts program at Gulf Islands Secondary School on Salt Spring. He arrived seven years ago and immediately removed the deep fryers, installing a salad bar in their stead. Since then, he and the students have put in microgreens growing towers in the cafeteria where students can rip off lettuce and other leafy greens to nibble while they wait for lunch—a parent's dream. Kilner and his students have also built greenhouses outside the school, installed a water fountain filtration system, and even bought a food truck that they operate all summer long. "They make $45,000 every summer, which they reinvest into the program," explains Jenkinson.

Chef Mark's program helps students gain concrete job skills while helping them understand where and how their food is grown. They're connecting to the larger community before even having graduated high school, and they are getting a sense for where their professional interests might lie.

Jenkinson's enthusiasm is contagious. "Whenever we meet with people from other islands or just talk with people in general about these things, there's just this sense of pride that shines through," she says. "They're proud. They want to share about their deeper connection to the work. There's this deep sense of heart in each of them."

While gardens ebb and flow in terms of production, the spirit of the people farming them doesn't seem to waiver. "These gardens grow and thrive. They have periods of activity, and then they have periods where they lie fallow, and perhaps that's okay," says Jenkinson. "Perhaps that's the rhythm of agriculture." She went on to say that if we as a province value this kind of learning, where we connect to our food and each other, then it's up to society at large to put some money towards it.

VICTORIA

In Victoria's Fernwood neighbourhood, Vic High is another schoolyard brimming with possibility. The statuesque heritage building is nestled between an urban residential neighbourhood to the south, Victoria's iconic Belfry Theatre and Fernwood Square to the north, and vibrant, well-used community gardens just a stone's throw to the west.

A new Learning Farm initiative sits on the grounds, just beside the Belfry, co-run by Farm to School BC and Jesse Brown of Mason Street City Farm. The student-powered growing operation has the potential to feed not just the school but also its surrounding community, driving a deeper sense of connectedness throughout the already-bustling area. The students have been hard at work expanding their current garden into a whopping 5,000-square-foot plot, spreading piles of leaf mulch and manure for maximum fertility.

Farming in a new location brings interesting obstacles, like, in this case, wireworm, a soil-dwelling pest that likes to lay eggs in freshly sown crops. But Brown has used these critters as a chance to show students how planting potatoes nearby can work as an organic pest deterrent. Every obstacle can be converted into a learning opportunity.

Mason Street provides the hands-on support and mentorship for Vic High's staff and students, with Farm to School BC offering funding and playing a liaison role. According to the latter's community animator, Aaren Topley, he's already seen students and teachers take a huge interest since the Learning Farm's grand opening this past spring.

"We're already getting students who are really engaged and wanting to become farmers," says Topley. This is particularly exciting given the projected 50 percent of Canadian farmers slated to retire in the next five to 10 years. Topley said one of Farm to School BC's goals is to identify young farmers earlier.

"More and more, young farmers are coming from urban spaces as opposed to the generations of farming families they used to," says Topley. "We want to identify them earlier before they go to university and acquire a ton of debt." He says that to do this successfully, we need to build networks outside of school so students feel connected to community before they graduate and to tailor those connections to meet the needs of each student.

With my three daughters piled in our minivan, I head out along Fernwood Road, passing the Tudor-style Fernwood Inn Pub I frequented in my "pre-kids" life, and head around to the backside of Vic High. I want to show the girls the garden these students and staff have been working to create. By the time my girls get to high school, the opportunities for being a part of learning farms like this one, understanding the significance of the land on which we operate, and helping to make learning environments more sustainable, will be mind-blowing.

My five-year-old, Malia, asks why the garden smells funny. This is my chance to fill her in on yet another important use for poo. She laughs, not entirely concerned with the fact that a space like this will absolutely be a part of her academic future. But I am already imagining her as a young lady delivering produce she and her peers nurtured and harvested to families nearby. School supply purchases would be a lot more fun if there were dirt, manure, and gardening gloves on the list. ◆