

Garden Bounty

Using a Community Garden to Teach Kids About Nutrition

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From her early teens, Sarah Garstka was into food but not in the way some kids might be at that age.

When she was 16, she read a book theorizing that what we eat impacts how we feel, and right then, knew she wanted a career in nutrition.

“At first I thought I wanted to do research. Then I found out how much there is to do in the community—food pantries and community gardens and teaching kids about good nutrition—and that was it,” says Garstka, a UNH junior and coordinator for the Thompson School of Applied Science’s Plant for Growth project. “I feel pretty lucky that I knew what I wanted to do when I was just a teenager.”

Plant for Growth was instrumental in building a community garden last year with the Somersworth Youth Safe Haven, which supports the city’s at-risk children and adolescents. The office and garden are located at the Somersworth Housing Complex.

As program coordinator, Garstka works with kids ranging in age from 5 to 18 tending the garden, talking to them about healthy eating, and teaching them to cook. Each child is in charge of one of the garden rows, responsible for its watering and weeding.

On Thursdays, Garstka hosts a cooking class that draws upwards of 40 kids. So far, they have made cucumber cupcakes and hummus seasoned with garden herbs.

“It’s been so rewarding. Getting them excited about eating vegetables is fantastic,” Garstka says. “We have garden parties where we go into the garden, pick the food and cook with it.”

The kids are good about trying new vegetables such as kohlrabi and nasturtiums, an edible flower that tastes similar to a radish. Last year, community leadership program co-founder and professor Kate Hanson launched a contest to get the children to try the nasturtiums and some Garstka says, even went back for seconds.

The garden is also giving seed to a cookbook; recipe submissions are now being collected from children at the Somersworth Youth Safe Haven, community members, and UNH faculty and staff.

“All of the recipes must include a crop grown in our fabulous garden. And all of the recipes used in cooking classes will be featured in the cookbook as well,” Garstka says.

Now that the garden is in its second year, they are trying to figure out how best to get the produce to the residents of the housing complex. “We don’t want anything to go to waste,” she says.

Garstka began her studies at UNH two years ago, receiving an associate degree in culinary arts and nutrition from the Thompson School in May and is now working toward her bachelor’s degree. Additionally she is in the Thompson School’s community leadership certificate program.

“I’ve never really been in a leadership position before so this is new to me,” Garstka says. “When you’re in non-leadership role, you can pretty much go with the flow. But as the leader, you have to make the flow. It’s a challenge but I love it.”

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ALUMNI

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