



# As more gardens sprout, schools find new way to reach students



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

**Framingham High School has one of the largest school gardens in the state, a 2-acre expanse.**

**By Steven A. Rosenberg** | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 20, 2016

FRAMINGHAM — Six years ago, Brendan Ryan gazed at the empty courtyard at Framingham High School and envisioned a garden that could serve as a hands-on experience to teach students where their vegetables come from.

His dream has become a verdant reality. Now, the district's affable food service director presides over a 2-acre expanse that stretches half a football field, in what is

Gone from the district's cafeterias are the fried foods and sugary drinks, replaced by fresh Brussels sprouts, squash, and eggplant.

Ryan is among the leaders of a burgeoning movement across the state to more fully integrate gardens into public schools. What started years ago as isolated, often small plots at a handful of schools has blossomed into more than 200 school gardens that have become multifaceted learning tools.

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Students learn more than how to grow and harvest their own vegetables; the gardens become part of classroom curriculums at many schools.

For Ryan, the Framingham High garden provides a chance to show students that the schools are committed to serving them healthy food.

“I think it’s trying to get kids to reconnect to what real food is,” he said on a recent day as he gripped a four-pronged hoe, leaned into the warm brown soil, and briskly dispatched a clump of weeds.

As the school year was winding down, activity at the plot was in full swing. About 40 students helped plant hundreds of tomatoes, peppers, herbs, sunflowers, and even watermelons — all of which will eventually be harvested and eaten by students.



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**Student Carolyn Morningstar worked in the Framingham High School garden. School officials hope to expand the garden next year.**

Tomatoes are the bumper crop, yielding 1,000 gallons of sauce that will last from September through April.

While districts choose different models for their gardens, some educators also use them as tools to teach math, science, and even literature and art.

“It’s not just about plants and healthy food. It’s a way for kids to learn how to read and get excited about writing and for them to understand the principles of science and math,” said Jane Hirschi, executive director of CitySprouts, which oversees gardens at 16 Cambridge schools and seven schools in Boston.

The gardens feature up to 80 different types of vegetables, ranging from carrots and potatoes to okra and peppers. Much of the harvest from the Cambridge gardens is cooked and served to students.

The nonprofit sends a garden coordinator to each school 10 hours a week, where they help maintain the gardens and work with teachers to integrate core subjects into classes.

At the Amigos School in Cambridge, kindergartners are taught to measure and record plant growth. Second-graders use colored pencils to draw plants and soil, and learn about seeds and composting.

At the Mather Elementary School in Dorchester, third-graders learn about area and perimeter and measure the garden’s dimensions and spacing in between plants.

Fourth-graders at the Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School in Roxbury grind corn; learn that corn, squash, and beans were key Native American crops; and also sketch and record their observations from the garden.

Hirschi said gardens are a natural pull for youngsters who are fascinated by nature. They also serve as a place where students can learn on their own and at their own pace.

“A garden allows them to mess around, to put their hands into the dirt to make things grow, to build a project to solve a problem,” she said, adding that some kids learn more from hands-on work than from reading a book or listening to a teacher lecture.



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And in the summer, CitySprouts offers a month-long internship for students who want to tend and harvest school gardens. At lunch, kids snack on garden vegetables, and at the end of their program earn \$100 in pay.

**The cafeteria at Framingham High serves student-grown Brussels sprouts (above), squash, eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, herbs, and watermelons.**

Students also grow and eat their own vegetables at schools in Somerville, Gloucester, and Marblehead.

Salem, which boasts three school gardens, is seeking to grow more crops. Seven years ago, Salem High teachers Graeme Marcoux and Matt Buchanan started growing tomatoes, cucumbers, and squash, and also added apple trees, a peach tree, and raspberry bushes. About 150 students volunteer in the garden each year and study how the plants grow.

Over the winter, the school received a grant to buy a freight farm — a shipping container transformed into a hydroponic garden to grow lettuce, kale, radishes, carrots, and Swiss chard.

Shawn Small, a Salem High junior, is one of several interns from Marcoux’s science classes who helps maintain the freight farm.

“In a world where most people are able to purchase their food from grocery stores, kids are no longer learning how to produce their own food,” said Small, who regularly inputs the levels of nutrients and the water’s pH solution into the freight farm’s computer to help determine optimal growth.

Comments  
Simca Horwitz, Eastern Massachusetts director of the Massachusetts Farm to School Project, a nonprofit which helps promote locally grown food, said school gardens have seen a huge growth across the state in the last 10 years.

“It can be a great teaching tool for kids who might be nontraditional learners,” she said. “And it also can be a really effective tool for encouraging healthy eating habits for students.”

In Framingham, Ryan is planning to expand the high school garden next year and expects more teachers to integrate the study of tomato plants, Brussels sprouts, and other plants into core classes. He’s already helped mentor several gardeners, including a former college intern who now works with him in food services in Framingham.

But Ryan, a fast-talking Long Island native who grew rhubarb as a child in his grandmother’s garden, believes the benefits of school gardening cannot be measured in numbers of interested students and educators.

“If one kid gets some sort of an idea or a career out of this, then we’re better off for it,” he said.

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