

School-based kitchen gardens are getting an A+

7 March 2013

Grow it, try it, and you just might like it is a motto many schools are embracing to encourage children to eat more fruits and vegetables. Through community-based kitchen garden programs, particularly those with dedicated cooking components, schools are successfully introducing students to healthier foods. In a new study released in the March/April 2013 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, researchers found that growing and then cooking the foods that kids grew increased their willingness to try new foods.

A group of investigators from the University of Melbourne and Deakin University recruited a total of 764 children in grades 3 to 6 and 562 parents participating in the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program. The program model is embedded in the school curriculum and includes 45 minutes per week in a garden class with a garden specialist and 90 minutes per week in the kitchen with a cooking specialist. The program is designed to give children knowledge and skills in environmentally sustainable gardening along with the skills to prepare and cook 3- or 4-course meals based on available fresh produce from the garden. Different dishes prepared each week included handmade pastry, bread and pasta, salads, curries, and desserts.

According to Lisa Gibbs, PhD, principle investigator, one of the major themes that emerged from the study was children eating and appreciating new foods. She said, "The program introduced children to new ingredients and tastes, and within a short time almost all children were prepared to at least try a new dish. Teachers at several schools also reported that they had seen a noticeable improvement in the [nutritional quality](#) of the food that children had been bringing to school for snacks and lunches since the program had been introduced."

Petra Staiger, PhD, co-investigator from Deakin

University added, "Data and class observations also suggested that the [social environment](#) of the class increased children's willingness to try new foods. This included sitting down together to share and enjoy the meal that they had prepared, with encouragement to taste but no pressure to eat."

For school gardens, this study emphasizes the other half of the equation to growing the food in school gardens, which is learning how to prepare it... true farm to fork programs.

More information: "Expanding Children's Food Experiences: The Impact of a School-Based Kitchen Garden Program," by Lisa Gibbs, PhD; Petra K. Staiger, PhD; Britt Johnson, BHSc; Karen Block, MPH; Susie Macfarlane, BScPsych; Lisa Gold, PhD; Jenny Kulas; Mardie Townsend, PhD; Caroline Long, PhD; and Obioha Ukoumunne, PhD, appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 45, Issue 2 (March/April 2013)

Provided by Elsevier

APA citation: School-based kitchen gardens are getting an A+ (2013, March 7) retrieved 30 November 2020 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-03-school-based-kitchen-gardens.html>

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