



SCHOOLED *in gardening*

By Al Cornell

A country school has greater potential to offer some time-valued courses that may not be possible at other schools. Folks at the K-12 Weston School have chosen to take advantage of those opportunities.

I came to the end of the REC lines as they barely crossed into Sauk County at that school. Carl Welke, food service director, met me to explain the effect of the school garden on the students and the community. Carl started the garden seven years ago. Current garden supervisor, Steve Gilbert, was busy in the shop running the apple cider press, extracting the cider from apples that were either harvested from the school orchard or brought in from the surrounding community. Steve manages the garden, guiding the students through the process of planting, harvesting, and packaging produce.

I soon began to envision a process that included many people, a flurry of activity, and vegetables produced and put to use. Primary student participants are selected by a committee from those who apply. Two freshmen and two juniors are selected. Since most of their work is done during the summer after the school year has ended, I suspect they would prefer to call themselves sophomores and seniors.

The two freshmen work 50 hours during the year, and each earns a \$500 credit toward college or trade school tuition. The juniors work about 15 hours per week. They also publish a related newsletter. They earn half credits in English, agriculture, and business that apply toward their graduation.

Not surprisingly, there have been a couple of selected students who quickly decided that gardening during the summer was not their thing. However, through a good selection process, this past year's selected freshmen and juniors were diligent gardeners. Freshmen Sadie Keller and Stephanie Stiemke along with juniors Abby Rothering and Marka Grunberg proved to be good choices for the program.

A 12-by-24 hoop house is utilized to get the early produce started in mid-March. The gardeners harvest their earliest produce by May 1. Produce continues to be harvested until early October.

A list of the produce grown is impressive. It includes romaine lettuce, radishes, snow peas, kale, kohlrabi, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, basil, cilantro, beets, garlic, two varieties of cabbage, pak choi, cherry and regular tomatoes, squash of yellow, spaghetti, and butternut varieties, plus Swiss chard and rutabagas. A delightful row of zinnias continued to bloom when I visited the garden.

Junior worker Abby said, "It was a good experience with most of the summer work being done during the cooler morning weather. My favorite



Sadie Keller and Stephanie Stiemke show off a Chinese-style cabbage.

part was the zinnias. We planted, maintained, picked and arranged them in bouquets. They were fun to work with because it was something different from just another vegetable, and they add a delightful touch to the vegetable packages."

Carl said, "We don't grow some of the common things like corn and potatoes

from early May until early October. A half-share at \$100 results in a delivery every other week. No pesticides are used on the garden, but it cannot be certified pesticide free because of its proximity to an area where they are used.

Most of the school provides some input in the garden. First-graders made up 1,200 feet of seed-tape for radishes

and spinach. Second-graders planted garlic in the fall, and they may have had to explain dirty knees or smelly hands to their parents. Older classes get

involved in setup and tear down. Most of the staff help in supervising students and various other activities. Bus drivers help till the garden.

Community members also get involved. After school starts, some help with the ongoing gardening. A farmer delivers manure. One person donated a tiller, and others contribute money to fund special needs that arise. Fruit trees were purchased and planted

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because many of these rural folks who purchase a share of our produce grow their own. Besides, those who don't grow their own corn and potatoes can easily find a local market offering that produce."

This is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. People can purchase a full share for \$200. A box of the produce harvested during a given week is then delivered each week

by community members, and anyone interested in helping can contact Steve or Carl to find out what needs to be done.

And so grows the garden. Rain water collected from the bus shed is distributed through a gravity-fed irrigation system. A double row of beans 90 feet long was planted and harvested three times. Sugar peas, which grow to more than 6 feet tall, produced 60 pounds of peas per week for 10 weeks. So, every week

boxes were filled with a large variety of produce.

In addition to filling seven shares and 13 half-shares, produce was used for other purposes. The school lunch program utilized peas, tomatoes, kohlrabi, squash, and watermelons. Some fruit trees add produce for the CSA distribution and the lunch program. This year, plums from the 2009 Earth Day planting and apples were utilized.

Produce has also been donated to senior centers and food pantries.

This garden project demonstrates the innovative mindset of the Weston School faculty. It brings together school activities and community support, and it reaches beyond the local area. It goes to ground level to help train students in practical work ethics and responsible character. It provides food for hungry folks and the special touch of zinnias. **B**



1. A plum tree planted in 2009 was a heavy producer. 2. Zinnias add a touch of color to the garden. 3. Abby Rothering and Marka Grunberg harvest garlic. 4. Steve Gilbert adds apples to the cider press attended by Amy Rothering, Diane Parish, and Jessica Parish.

MY CO-OP