



Urban Harvest

Outdoor Classrooms Sow Seeds of Education

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Urban Harvest Curriculum Coordinator Irene Nava assists young garden entrepreneurs at the Whole Kids Market, a project of Whole Foods Whole Kids Foundation. The foundation also offers grants for school gardens.



What do children find fascinating about the school garden? Cauliflower for one, but also learning about core subjects in ways they can't sitting at a desk.

August means back to school for children across Houston, and for a growing number of students it also means going back to the garden. From pre-school to high school, outdoor classrooms are sprouting like weeds. School gardens remain the fastest-growing type of community garden assisted by [Urban Harvest](#).

Outdoor classrooms are gaining popularity for a number of reasons, but fundamentally they captivate students in ways that sitting at a desk can't compete. Students gain a sense of stewardship and accomplishment provided by the hands-on learning experiences. Outdoor classrooms offer lessons in math, reading, writing, social studies, science, art and life skills beginning at the pre-K level and continuing through 12th grade.

A national study of 40 schools with hands-on environmental activities found almost all schools showed an increase in standardized test scores and experienced fewer discipline problems from a better-behaved student body.



Students at John H. Reagan High School served more than 300 samples of Kool Kale Salad during two lunch periods.

Successful school gardens require broad-based support from school administrators, teachers, students and parents. Parental involvement strengthens the school's relationship with the community and both flourish, yielding yet another benefit. School gardens impact

communities by providing fresh, nutritious food when students share the harvest at school and at home. When produce is sold at an Urban Harvest farmers market or in lieu of the traditional bake sale, it has an economic impact on young farmers as they earn money for school programs while learning entrepreneurial skills.

Plan your garden to meet your school's needs and ability to maintain it. While a large outdoor classroom offers more learning opportunities, starting small allows the garden time to gain the support needed for success. Some schools start with what has become known as "cylinder gardens." Initially a project of Target Hunger, cylinder gardens are bottomless 5-gallon buckets, stabilized in the ground, and usually planted with edibles.

With growing interest and support, small gardens can incorporate orchards, ponds and wildlife habitats and evolve into flourishing outdoor classrooms where classroom lessons come to life. Plant the seeds and the learning never stops for eager young minds.

If you are interested in starting a community garden or becoming involved with a school garden in your area, log onto the Urban Harvest website, UrbanHarvest.org. There is information to get you started including: existing outdoor classrooms and school



Sweet potatoes are a low-maintenance crop for school summer gardens. They keep beds weed free over the summer months when children are away. As a root crop, they provide a hunt-and-find venture when children return.

partnerships, after-school programs, visiting garden educators, classes and workshops, and links to other organizations that provide assistance.



In 2013, Urban Harvest Director of Youth Education Carol Burton (pictured) and the Urban Harvest School and Youth Program were nominated by the Houston Independent School District Strategic Partnerships Department and received the Crystal Award for Service Learning from Texas Association for Partners in Education (TAPE).

You will find some funding sources on the Urban Harvest website, but there are many more online. A good place to start is the America in Bloom website, americainbloom.org, under resources, then grant opportunities. With dedication from school administrators and teachers and commitment from the community, schoolchildren everywhere can discover the interconnected disciplines provided by an outdoor classroom.

This column is produced by Urban Harvest. Learn about gardening classes, community gardens and orchards, farmers markets and more at www.urbanharvest.org.