

School gardens sprout in central San Joaquin Valley

By Lewis Griswold

Growbotics after-school program teaches Visalia Unified School District students about plant biology, soil science, water conservation and more through campus gardens. Every VUSD school has its own garden. THEFRESNOBEE

- *All 25 Visalia Unified elementary schools have an after-school gardening program, the latest example in a growing national movement.*
- *At least 11 schools in Fresno Unified have school gardens, some for as long as 10 years.*
- *Both agriculture education and the organic food trend have helped spur the movement.*

Garden teacher Erin Largoza empties a tub of worms and soil onto a brown tarp at Oak Grove Elementary School in northwest Visalia.

“I want you to find the worms and put them in a cup,” she tells a group of students who start pawing through the dirt. “We want to save all of our worms and put the soil on our beds.”

It doesn't take long for the students to find dozens of wriggling creatures.

“Look at how many worms I've got in my hands,” says first-grader Matthew Soto, 7.

“They're all squirmy because they're wormy,” says fourth-grader Abigail Bond, 10.

Matthew and Abigail are in the new after-school Growbotics gardening program launched last fall at Visalia Unified's 25 elementary schools.

It's so popular that most schools have a waiting list of potential participants.

“It's really an outdoor science class,” says Daryn Davis, CEO of [Pro-Youth](#) in Visalia, which operates Growbotics for Visalia Unified. “We teach water conservation, weather, plant biology, history of agriculture, soil composition and nutrition. They can literally see their food growing.”

The organization operates similar gardens at schools in Exeter, Farmersville, Strathmore and Woodville, and at Sequoia High continuation school in Visalia.

The school garden movement has been spreading across the country for about 20 years and gained momentum when first lady Michelle Obama started growing food in a White House kitchen garden. And gardens have been a feature at schools in Fresno County and elsewhere in the Valley for at least a decade.

The movement has roots in both agricultural education and the organic food trend.

Twenty years ago, organic food pioneer Alice Waters in Berkeley, who opened [Chez Panisse](#) restaurant, helped launch the [Edible Schoolyard Project](#) at a middle school in Berkeley by supporting both a school garden and a teaching kitchen.

The Edible Schoolyard Project's online community now has 4,000 members around the globe, with garden projects at schools, libraries and community centers.

“Kids love it,” says Edible Schoolyard administrative coordinator Heather Campbell. “It encourages them in a completely different way. They remember things better.”

The [Tulare County Farm Bureau](#) has been sponsoring school gardens for 13 years and has about 20 participating schools.

“We are seeing the same trend of healthy eating. That’s fruits and vegetables and dairy and nuts — that’s what we grow here,” says program coordinator Carrie Crane. “It’s proved to be a venue for agricultural literacy such as water management and soil health.”

Steady growth in Fresno

At least 11 schools in Fresno Unified have school gardens, some for as long as 10 years. Some are after-school programs, while others, such as the Sunnyside High School agricultural pathways garden, is part of the curriculum.

The schools include Dailey Elementary Charter School, Jefferson, Lawless, Ayer, and Powers-Ginsburg elementary school, Rata School, and Kings Canyon, Baird and Tehipite middle schools. Greenberg Elementary is developing a garden to attract butterflies.

The School of Unlimited Learning charter school in downtown Fresno obtained a grant from Western Growers and planted its first garden this year for use by the environmental science class, says principal Mark Wilson. Students planted tomatoes, peppers, onions, garlic, cilantro, corn, cucumbers and other vegetables.

“We’re creating awareness,” Wilson says.

And the Kermit Koontz Education Complex in Fresno has a school garden, newly refurbished by a Boy Scouts troop, that’s used by special education students ages 18 to 22. There’s also a student garden at Reedley College used by an adult transition program.

Life lessons in 1 square foot

In Visalia, each child gets 1 square foot to plant seeds.

Oak Grove fifth-grader Izabella Franco, 10, says she decided to start gardening because “I wasn’t in a lot of clubs, and I wanted to learn something new.”

Students regularly record air temperature and ground temperature and write it down in their binders. “Some students get good at predicting when their crops will rise using that data,” says Growbotics administrator Juan Villarreal.

Students plant seeds and seedlings, remove weeds, water the garden and harvest what they grow. Sustainable techniques are used.

Fall gardens are planted with broccoli, cabbage, kohlrabi, carrots, spinach and beets. Spring gardens have squash, carrots, tomatoes, herbs, eggplant and lettuce.

There’s always a “mystery garden” in which unmarked seedlings are planted, and children watch to see what develops.

“They are pretty excited when those crops are ready to harvest,” Villarreal says.

Oak Grove fifth-grader Faith Bither, 10, showed an eight-ball squash that she just harvested from the mystery garden.

“I like how we can all come together and plant and harvest stuff,” she says. “You can learn and do something fun.”

Students also learn about tasting the food they grow. At Houston Elementary near downtown Visalia, garden teacher

Aleta Ardesch cut up two varieties of radishes and students tasted the difference.

And, of course, there's that most important lesson of all: "My favorite thing is watering the plants and keeping them alive," says Houston third-grader Saul Fernandez, 9. "If you don't keep them alive, you won't harvest them."

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