

A close-up photograph of several onions, some with their roots still attached. The onions are in shades of purple and white, with some showing a gradient. The roots are thin and white. The background is a soft, out-of-focus mix of these colors.

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Celebrating the Bounty of Rhode Island, Season by Season
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A Moveable Feast · SPRING FEVER

A GARDEN GROWS · THE REAL DEAL

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SCHOOL YARD
BY CHRISTINE CHITNIS
PHOTOS BY CHIP RIEGEL

CULTIVATING CURIOSITY

*Students Get the Dirt
on Where Their Food Comes From*

It's a cloudless late-September afternoon and the enticing smell of grilled pizza wafts through the air. The fall harvest is underway, fulfilling spring's promise. Everyone from parents and community members to Mayor James Doyle and Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts are gathered outside of the International Charter School (ICS) in Pawtucket to celebrate the harvest of their school garden. Eager students wander through the crowd, proudly offering up hot slices topped with fresh basil and tomato, straight from their garden.





The fertile plot of land at the center of this celebration did not start out as the bountiful garden that it is today. Where most passers-by saw a sorry-looking patch of crabgrass invading the front of the school, ICS parent and landscape architect Kate Lacoutere saw great potential.



With the blessing of ICS director Julie Nora, support from the Children's Garden Network and a team of volunteers, Lacoutere set about planning a multi-functional garden and raising the funds to make it happen.

The actual design of the garden, as well as the design of the intricate Steel Yard

sculptures adorning the grounds, is based on student drawings, which gives them a sense of ownership over the space. While Lacoutere and her volunteers handled the hard labor—digging the foundation, laying stone work and spreading soil—the job of planting fell to the students.

In spring students plant themed plots, with each grade choosing a different menu: the pizza garden is planted with basil and tomato; the salsa garden with tomatillos, peppers, tomatoes and cilantro; and the salad garden with lettuce and peas. In addition, a potato patch and popcorn field intertwines with a butterfly garden, where students come to learn the wonders of science first-hand.

As Nora explains, "Watching a butterfly metamorphose from a caterpillar to a cocoon to a glorious monarch makes a lasting impression that reading about simply can't equal." In this way, the garden serves as an extension of the classroom, and curriculum is constantly being designed to take this outdoor space into account.

Left to right: Students show off the purple tomatillos from the garden; ICS students enjoying harvest days; Garden sculpture from the Steel Yard. Previous page: ICS garden.

Zachary, a fifth grader, enjoys when his science lessons come to life in the garden. "I like it when all the butterflies and insects make their home here and we get to study them. One time we even saw a praying mantis. I'd never seen anything like it!"

Once the spring planting is complete, students recess for summer break and a team of parent and student volunteers tend the garden, rotating watering and weeding shifts until school opens again in the fall. Upon their return to school, the children are greeted by the fruits of their labors.

Witnessing the bounty of their garden has helped students better understand the food production process, from seed to fruit, and feel a greater connection to their food. As Joshua, a fifth grader, explains, "Once I found a giant potato that was ready to be harvested. So, I dug

it up and gave it to the lunchroom, where they turned it into baked potato chips!"

What greater way to celebrate a successful harvest than to watch it being turned into a favorite food. Lt. Gov. Roberts summed it up perfectly: "I am not sure that there is a better science project than turning over the earth, planting a seed and



watching it grow into something you can eat and enjoy!"

In between bites of pizza, Stu Nunnery, network coordinator for the Children's Garden Network, explained how his organization assisted in making the ICS garden a success. "We provide guidance and resources but it is really up to the school to take the project into their own hands. Julie, Kate and the entire ICS community have done a fantastic job with this project. It has been a very positive partnership."

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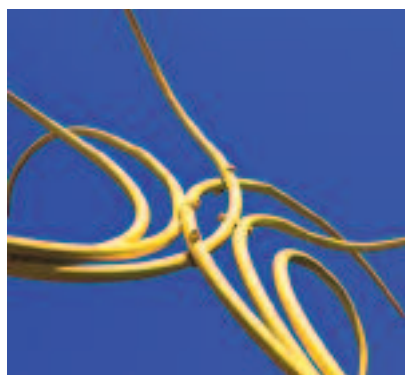
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ICS is not alone in its green-thumb accomplishments. School gardens are cropping up across the state, many because of the efforts of the Children's Garden Network, whose goal is to see a garden at every school and youth organization in Rhode Island by the end of this year.

Ponaganset Middle School in

North Scituate is another example of a school gardening project that benefited greatly from the Network's financial and technical support.

When the new middle school building was still in its planning phase, Janet Ragno, a longtime school employee, wanted to make it a destination that could be enjoyed by the entire community. She felt that the best way to achieve this would be to plant an orchard, which could serve as a gathering space and outdoor classroom.

"I wanted to see the students get their hands dirty, get outside and learn how to nurture. I don't think that the art of nurturing is being stressed enough in schools," Janet explains. "I also felt that a picturesque apple orchard could provide an ideal space for the community to come together." In addition to being aesthetically appealing, apple trees are perfectly suited for the school calendar, producing blossoms in the spring and fruit in the fall.

A grant from the Children's Garden Network and a matching gift from a local community member made the project possible, and once the initial funds were in place, the community and school rallied to make the vision a reality. The Ponaganset teachers stretched their imaginations as they came up with a creative curriculum that would include the orchard. Barden Family Orchard donated the semi-dwarf apple trees and educated the students on where to plant the trees and how to tend

to them organically. Over 400 community members came to the planting and dedication ceremony.

Building on the success of the orchard, which is now in its third year, Ponaganset Middle School has plans to turn its remaining 84 acres into a "living campus," in which all land is used as outdoor educational space. Upcoming projects include a partnership with the Gloucester Police Department to create a permanent universal design garden, and this spring the school will break ground on an herb and vegetable garden, the harvest to be donated to a community food bank.

The fruitful efforts of ICS and Ponaganset Middle School offer children a chance to experience a greater connection to the earth, a better understanding of how food grows and an appreciation for the wonders of nature. In this age of bigger, better, faster, where iPods and Xboxes reign supreme, the act of gardening forces students to slow down and reconnect with the age-old joys of tending a simple patch of earth. There is no video game that can match the wonder and mystery of watching a seedling come to life.

"As this generation of farmers is getting older, it is important to create an educational platform to get students thinking about careers in agriculture and horticulture," explains Nunnery. "We strive to make gardens that are living, interactive experiences, rather than just something pretty to look at. We want children to feel a real connection to the earth."

Judging by the smiles and full bellies on a clear September afternoon in Pawtucket, Nunnery may see his wish come true as generations of land-loving gardeners sprout up before our very eyes. *eR*

Christine Chitnis is a freelance writer and aspiring gardener who lives in Providence with her husband and two feisty chickens.

Visit her at christinechitnis.com.

For a complete statewide school garden listing, plus detailed information on existing school gardens or how to start a school garden in Rhode Island, visit childrensgardennetwork.org.

