



A Community Garden Takes Root at Rhinebeck Elementary, with Aspirations of Feeding Lunches to Kids



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By Elena Gastaldo



At an August launch event, two garden beds were established and several crops planted (photo from Facebook).

An edible garden, an idea that has been germinating for years and that even got an extra boost when California chef Alice Waters [visited Rhinebeck](#) in 2023, has taken root at Chancellor Livingston Elementary School in Rhinebeck.

While there are no plans yet to create a formal gardening curriculum or to hire a garden teacher, the garden will hopefully grow two beds at a time for the next five years, officials said.

The ultimate goal of the program, jump-started by a parent's connection to the non-profit Dirty Gaia, is for students to grow part of the food served for lunches at the school, said Principal Brett King. But in the short run, some kids will get hands-on exposure to growing food and tracking the life cycle of plants.

"They literally get to see the product of their effort and interest," King said. "Never underestimate the value of kids getting their hands dirty."

At least one teacher plans to utilize the garden this year for her



Principal Brett King's team has sketched out a master plan for the garden, tucked into a courtyard, that includes trees and the gazebo (map courtesy Brett King).

curriculum with English language learners.

"Getting my students actively involved in their learning, seeing things in real life, and bringing that back into the classroom is so important for them," said Kelsey Schroedl, the school's English as a New Language (ENL) teacher, who is also on the school planning team for the garden. "It just makes their learning and understanding grow so much more."

To launch the project, the elementary school has partnered with Dirty Gaia, a local environmental non-profit that runs year-round programs such as school garden clubs and edible garden tours to promote earth stewardship.

The school staff, including King, Food Services Director Larry Anthony, and several teachers, are working with Kaitlin Doherty, program coordinator at Dirty Gaia and a



A dozen children and their parents helped plant the first crops at the new garden at Chancellor Livingston Elementary in August (photo from Facebook).

parent at the school, to plan the next steps for the program.

In its early stages, the garden will be used for the Environmental Enrichment Program, a club that takes place before school, as well as the fall elective Gardening Club, King said. For the first time in the history of Dirty Gaia, which has been running spring garden clubs since 2002, a fall garden club also will be hosted this fall at the elementary school in Rhinebeck for third- to fifth-graders. The 15 students in the club will plant garlic and a bed of strawberries, which will come to fruit in the spring, Doherty said.



The non-profit Dirty Gaia, which has years of experience advising on garden projects, is helping lead the effort to establish a garden at Chancellor Livingston (photo from Facebook).

“The school garden project is very much aligned with the mission of Dirty Gaia, so it’s a really nice fit,” Doherty added. Dirty Gaia approached the school about a partnership four years ago, said its Executive Director, Sue Sie.

Sie said the organization wants to ensure the continued success of the program by creating interest and engaging teachers, students and parents. King said that Dirty Gaia will be involved in the garden program as long as the organization is willing to help. The organization has not received compensation for its work, but leaders are hoping to be paid if the relationship with the district deepens, Sie said.



During
the past
year,
the
school

For now, the crops are being planted in raised beds (photo from Facebook).

conducted a survey among students, parents and staff to find out what they would like to grow. Strawberries were most requested, King said. The feedback also informed a five-year plan.

Anthony added that the vision is eventually to grow tomatoes, onions, garlic and basil so the school can produce its own tomato sauce for use in school menus. The school serves about 400 meals a day, he said.

Officials have allocated roughly \$2,000 this year to pay for compost, wheelbarrows, and other supplies. Outside donors may be asked to fund more expensive items such as a gazebo, which will be installed in the middle of the garden as decor, King said.

There are currently no plans for a gardening class at the school because, King said, he wants to take the time to be strategic about the school's needs and budget. "I think the curriculum will catch up with it organically as we develop interest," King said.

But Schroedl said her students will learn science, grammar, vocabulary, and phonics while observing the garden and its output. They will also learn how to write the steps to grow a plant, label plants, and journal their observations.

“It’s so hands-on,”

In the spring 2023, the celebrated California chef Alice Waters joined Rhinebeck children on the second Walking School Bus sojourn hosted by Rhinebeck Climate Smart (photo by Emily Sachar).

Schroedl said. “I can really immerse them in their learning.”

Parents had been pushing for a school garden at Chancellor Livingston for years. Alice Waters’ visit to Rhinebeck in May 2023 galvanized that interest.

“She created a really great buzz and started the conversation up again,” King said. Red Hook schools have hosted an extensive gardening program for more than a decade, and in 2023, it designated a full-time gardening teacher, Doug Keto, who has embedded lessons on earth and life science throughout the elementary school curriculum.

Red Hook's Mill Road Garden is more than 10 years old (photo courtesy Red Hook Central School District).

Waters' Edible Garden Project, which integrates organic vegetable gardening with interdisciplinary coursework and culinary activities, has 6,200 school members worldwide as of 2023.

The Chancellor Livingston project kicked off in August when students and their families gathered to plant pumpkins, strawberries, herbs, lettuce, greens, and beans in two small raised beds, each 4-by-8 feet and 12 inches high. Surrounded by gardening tools, mounds of dirt, buckets, and shovels, they also took soil samples, planted seeds, and painted rocks.

"There was a lot of enthusiasm," said Anthony, who also serves as food director in Red Hook. "It's been on parents' minds to bring something like this to Rhinebeck."

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