

# seeds of knowledge

Can growing squash in fourth grade reduce obesity among American youth? One Ohio family is betting the farm.

Teacher Katie Schulz of Lake Ridge Academy in North Ridgeville, OH, passed small plates of fragrant herbs around her classroom. She asked her students to take a taste and guess what they were eating. “They tried to stay straight-faced, so they wouldn’t give anything away. But some of the herbs tasted sweet and some were really strongly flavored,” she says. “It was so funny. Some of the kids had never tasted fresh herbs before, and their reactions were comical.”

These weren’t just any herbs, like curly parsley or Italian basil. The students tried anise hyssop, red ribbon sorrel and popcorn shoots—aromatics that are unfamiliar to many gourmet chefs. Then they sampled peachy-pink carrots, pale-green pea tendrils, ruby-edged lettuce leaves and brightly hued Watermelon radishes. This exotic fare didn’t come from the the local super-market. It was part of the Veggie U

curriculum, a five-week “Earth-to-table” science course affiliated with the Chef’s Garden, a 200-acre, family-run vegetable farm in Huron, OH.

#### From Dirt to Desk

The Chef’s Garden grows more than 600 varieties of vegetables and herbs to sell to restaurants across the country. A team of growers and researchers and three generations of the Jones family







work every aspect of the farm, from sowing to sales. Veggie U, a nonprofit educational program, grew out of discussions with chefs about ways to use knowledge about food and agriculture to stem the epidemic of food-related health problems among children.

Veggie U is a fourth-grade curriculum that meets national science standards. The lessons are rooted in a simple premise: Children who experience hands-on learning in how to grow and harvest their own vegetables will want to eat them, now and later in life.

"The big-picture question is, are these children going to choose to eat a vegetable, or a Twinkie?" says Barbara Jones, Veggie U's founder and director. Clearly, Jones isn't the only one asking. What began as a pilot program in 15 local classrooms in 2004 is now taught in more than 625 classrooms in 21 states around the country.

"No society can survive without a strong connection to the soil," says Chef's Garden CEO and lifelong farmer Bob Jones, Sr. "When I was a youngster, every kid was intimately acquainted with the soil and the ups and downs of agriculture. Today kids have no idea where their food comes from."

#### The Nitty Gritty

When schools express interest in acquiring the Veggie U curriculum, education coordinator Debra Nickoloff works with them to identify funding sources to pay for the \$400 classroom kits. "Because we're a grassroots organization, we don't have the resources yet to fund everyone," she says. Often a local business, gardening club or even grandparent will step up and earmark donations for a particular school. Veggie U is also working to cultivate corporate sponsors whose missions are aligned with theirs.

Once funding is in place, the participating classroom receives a curriculum and kit, including a "tasting box" of out-of-the-ordinary herbs and vegetables. "We want the children to see that there are some exciting options when it comes to vegetables," says Nickoloff. Each kit also contains everything needed to create a classroom garden, including the following:

**grow lights** to enhance available classroom light and help plants grow faster

**four greenhouse-quality planting flats**

**different types of soil** so that students can learn which kind (sand, potting soil, etc.) is optimal for plant growth

**gravel** for proper soil drainage

**compost** to show students how soil can be enriched without chemicals

**root viewers** that let students study plant-root systems and discover how nutrients are taken from the soil

**15 seed varieties** from basic basil to ruffled beets

**vermiculite**, a top-grade heated puffed mica rock that is sprinkled over seeds to seal in moisture

**earthworms** that return nutrients to the soil and keep it healthy and fertile

## garden of delights

Talk about veggie heaven! Imagine 200 acres of Ohio farmland (about the size of a small university campus) devoted to growing more than 600 varieties of vegetables, microgreens and herbs. That's what professional cooks and customers find when they visit The Chef's Garden in Huron, OH. Here, produce is grown to order—plants are harvested at various stages of maturity—for chefs across the country who are willing to pay a premium for the time, attention and care that goes into growing and caring for each plant.

Under the management of the Jones family, research biologists

regulate the temperature, light, humidity and moisture of all the seeds to ensure their quality before planting. Microbiologists routinely test the ripening produce for food safety. And a team of 10 on-site growers oversees the greenhouses, where seedlings are treated as tenderly as newborns.

Even a full-color catalog of the goodies available from the Chef's Garden pales in comparison to seeing the operation firsthand. The rows and rows of unusual plants (like sweet Aztec and edible chocolate-scented geraniums) are visually breathtaking. The intense flavors

of hand-harvested items such as microsorrel, microparsley and petite arugula are unforgettable.

"When chefs tour the farm, they get so inspired they actually start shaking," explains Lee Jones, head of marketing and sales. Visiting cooks aren't limited to just looking, either. At the Culinary Vegetable Institute (CVI) a compound built a few miles from the Chef's Garden, they can experiment with the Chef's Garden produce in a state-of-the-art kitchen. This is the third arm of the Jones family's enterprise. The CVI was designed specifically to enhance the collaboration between farmer and chef, and brings the Earth-to-table concept full circle.



"The kids think the worms are the most exciting part of the program. They love the yuck factor!" laughs Terri Jones Smith, Bob and Barbara's daughter and a Veggie U administrator. "Worms have a whole underground culture the kids have never experienced before."

But the curriculum isn't all grime and growing. Students study science concepts such as soil biology, plant anatomy, photosynthesis and seed germination and, of course, nutrition. By teaching about a vegetable's life cycle from start to finish and connecting these concepts to nutrition, the program emphasizes that the most healthful foods come straight from the Earth, and not from a package. Students also discuss the US Department of Agriculture's My Pyramid (which suggests calorie and serving amounts of the major food groups based on age, gender, height, weight and activity level), learn to read food labels and study which nutrients keep their bodies healthy. "It's an interdisciplinary curriculum," says Nickoloff. "The teacher has the opportunity to bring in English and language arts through journaling. Students get math by measuring out rows for planting, charting the growth of the plants and dividing the seeds. And there's even drama. In one classroom, the students put on a play, with each child taking the part of a different vegetable."

The culmination of the program is a "feast of the future," where children design vegetable-based menus, centerpieces and invitations for family members to come see what they've been learning. Students make and serve dishes such as vegetable pita pizzas and salsa. Their lettuces and squash blossoms will likely have grown enough for them to serve a small salad, but the other plants will be used mainly for decoration and discussion. At the end of the program, all students receive a Veggie U certificate of completion.

#### Growing Support

To promote Veggie U, the chefs who purchase the five-star produce from the Chef's Garden are putting down their whisks and picking up laser pointers to present the program to policymakers and the general public.

"Veggie U is really grassroots. There's nothing fancy-schmancy or ivory tower about it," says cookbook author and chef Sara Moulton. "You plant your vegetables, grow your vegetables and eat your vegetables. To me it's the most important program that's out there right now." In addition to serving as a guest chef at a fund-raiser in 2005, Moulton recently presented Veggie U to a gathering of the nation's governors in Washington, DC.

Dale Hawkins, executive chef at Stonewall Resort in Roanoke, WV, stumps for the Veggie U cause, too. He has taught culinary classes to raise money for the program and participates in Veggie U's annual Food & Wine Celebration benefit. He has also met with state officials to help bring the program to West Virginia's classrooms. "It's absolutely imperative for children to appreciate where their food comes from and to have that connectivity to the Earth," he says.

The ultimate goal of Veggie U's staff and volunteers is to reach all the fourth-grade classrooms in America and change the way kids eat, one set of taste buds at a time. If the results in Katie Schulz's classroom are any indication, the Veggie U revolution is well under way. After Schulz presented the curriculum in her class, the parent of one of her students called from the grocery store to say, "My son no longer wants me to buy his favorite fruit roll-ups. What are you doing in school?"

#### contact:

To learn more about Veggie U or lend your support, visit [veggieU.org](http://veggieU.org) or contact education coordinator Debra Nickoloff at [dnickoloff@culinaryvegetableinstitute.com](mailto:dnickoloff@culinaryvegetableinstitute.com).

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