



“I’m in 4-H, but I never really thought about where my food comes from. Through this project, I found out about local food and how good it is for the community and for me.”

– Karen Schneck, student gardener at West Junior High School in Lawrence

Lettuce, peppers, spinach and cherry tomatoes grow in neatly marked rows outside the school. Inside, volunteers are using those ingredients to prepare a community dinner celebrating the success of this garden tended by students.

Meanwhile, the young gardeners huddle with their mentors around a table outside. Everyone puts a hand in the middle of the table for a group cheer. “Grow food! Grow West! Who!” they shout, throwing their arms up in the air.

Growing Food, Growing West

The Growing Food, Growing West garden project was partially funded by LiveWell Lawrence, a Kansas Health Foundation grantee. Six of the seven student gardeners were hired for this project by the Community Mercantile Co-op in Lawrence. With the help of adult garden coordinators, they do the planting, weeding, watering, mulching and harvesting.

“It’s just so incredibly meaningful to get the next generation started so early with growing their own food and eating healthy,” garden coordinator Dan Phelps says. “They planted the seeds and patiently waited a few months to harvest the crops. There’s just so much more joy to eat it at that point. It’s yours. You made it.”

A local music group called Three Bean Salad starts to play as servers load the



buffet tables with savory butternut squash and black bean burritos, fresh salsa, six-grain pilaf with West Garden herbs and West Garden veggie salad.

“I heard about the garden project through the school announcements,” student gardener Maddie Williams says. “Lucky for me, I got chosen. I also kind of grew with the garden, which was really cool.”

The line to get food snakes all the way through the cafeteria and down the hall. More than 200 people – including the school board president – have shown up for dinner. Families and neighbors gather around tables to share the meal and conversation.

“This time last year, this garden was just an idea we had, and we didn’t even know ourselves what would happen,” project director Nancy O’Connor says.

“What has happened is that people were ready for this. Our schools were ready to have gardens, and the school-to-garden concept is really taking off.”

A Trend Begins

Many people in Lawrence have high hopes that more schools, hospitals and child care centers will use more locally grown foods, and West’s garden project will expand to two elementary schools next year.

But for locally grown foods to become widely available, production must scale up. “We have about 11,000 kids in Lawrence schools,” says Marilyn Hull, director of LiveWell Lawrence. “That means we’d have to have a supplier who could give us 5,000 apples in a day.”

That isn’t possible yet, but the school district supports the local food concept and has hired a farm-to-cafeteria coordinator to help with this effort. LiveWell Lawrence and other groups are researching ways for more produce to be transported and stored safely.

For now, Lawrence is thrilled to have a school garden that will be maintained long after the current students have graduated.

“Look at all the little kids here tonight,” Hull says, gesturing toward young families and adults with babies in their arms. “Maybe when they get older, they’ll look forward to working in a garden like this.”





The idea to plant a garden at West Junior High School in Lawrence sprouted just 1 year ago. Since the 4,000-square-foot garden started in Spring 2010, it has yielded a half-ton of produce, provided 220 pounds of vegetables for the school cafeteria and raised \$4,000 through student-run farmer's markets. The Kansas Health Foundation helped support this project through its statewide Nutrition and Physical Activity Initiative, which provides grants that encourage communities to eat healthier and be more physically active.



Grant helps local foods grow

Changing Lives. Improving Health.



Kansas Health Foundation

309 East Douglas Wichita, KS 67202-3405

