

Globe South

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BELLA ENGLISH



Students explore a school garden with Katherine Sims.

Bringing kids to the land, and good food to the table

When Katherine Sims left the rarefied air of Yale, taking a semester off to apprentice at farms in rural Vermont, she had no idea that was where her future lay. But she quickly fell in love with the agrarian life. A history major who grew up in Wellesley and Milton, Sims returned to Yale, where she helped create a sustainable farm on campus. Right after graduation, she returned to the Northeast Kingdom.

While working in the fields, Sims met her husband, a beekeeper. They bought 40 acres of land and together built their timber-frame house, much of the wood coming from their own property. The house is totally off the grid, with solar design, radiant heat, super insulated walls, recycled materials, and a wood-fired boiler with a hot water storage tank.

BELLA ENGLISH, Page 6

Young farmers, growing healthily

► **BELLA ENGLISH**
Continued from Page 1

Just a few miles south of the Canadian border, the Northeast Kingdom has high rates of poverty and childhood obesity, double the statewide average. "It's a classic food desert," says Sims, 28. "It becomes a food access issue."

With all that farmland, and with schools providing two meals a day for children, Sims saw an opportunity. In 2005, she started an after-school program at an elementary school in Westfield where the pupils planted a garden. The model program quickly expanded, and Green Mountain Farm-to-School was born. The nonprofit that has expanded to 20 schools throughout the region has also spread beyond the gardens the children plant, with the harvest going right back into the school cafeterias.

"The local food movement is about bringing good, nutritious food to all despite the income," says Sims, who was in Milton last weekend for a fundraiser. The program draws a third of its budget from individual and corporate donations, a third from grants and foundations, and a third from the schools. Another component of the program is getting produce from local farms into the schools, which benefits both the farmers and the children, who, she says, suffer from "nature deficit disorder."

For the first time, the children are eating things like kale, winter squash, rutabaga, rhubarb, and cilantro. They see their crops through from seeds to table. "When they're involved in harvesting and preparing it, they're willing to try it," Sims says, acknowledging that it's also about the right recipes. "We've had great success with confetti salad, made with carrots, beets, and apples."

Once a month, they sample new recipes and offer feedback to the school food service. "So they're participating in recipe development," says Sims. Creations include asparagus and yogurt dip, granola parfait, zucchini parmesan, jack o'lantern soup, and spring greens.

"My favorite memory of the garden was finding out that carrots can be purple, too," says Allura Reynard, a third-grader at Jay Westfield School.

Kaya Germaine, a first-grader at the Holland School, says she loves taking the food they make "home to share with my mom and grampy."

Sims says such enthusiasm is shared by the food service workers, who didn't know what local foods were available and how to order them. Farm-to-School takes care of that, sending a weekly e-mail out to the schools telling them what they can get from them and from local farms. Orders are then placed through the organization. "They were getting stuff from big food distributors, from Califor-



Katherine Sims works with students at the Lowell Graded School, one of 20 in Vermont involved in the farm program.

nia and beyond," says Sims. The schools have told Sims about the dramatic shift from processed and canned foods since the program began. Some cafeterias now offer salad bars with organic, locally grown products — much of it supplied by the children who last year grew more than a ton of food.

In the winter, the focus shifts from garden to cafeteria. There are also field trips to composting facilities, apple orchards, dairies, and farms, where students learn about sheep and make items from the wool. They milk cows, collect eggs, harvest honey from a beehive, and make butter and yogurt and ice cream for their schools. They help with maple sugaring and visit a farm that produces corn for cornmeal and wheat for whole wheat pastry and bread flour.

Now, they grow their own wheat. "We harvest it in the fall, they thresh it and we grind it together. Then the kids get to turn it into pretzels," says Sims. Most of the gardens are right in front of the schools, to make a statement about healthy eating and sustainable agriculture.

Workshops complement the garden and farm activities, with topics such as "sheep to sweater," "wiggly worms", composting, and planting flowers for Mother's Day. Along the way, history and math lessons are slipped in, from Colonial America's agriculture to math problems involving weights, averages, and means.

Dean Vervoort, principal of Jay/Westfield School, serves on the board of directors of Green Mountain Farm-to-School, and says the program has enhanced the children's education and health. "Students love growing and eating vegetables from our school garden and participating in the program's fun, hands-on activities," he says.

In fact, at their recent graduation, some students made and served rhubarb punch.

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