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Program gets kids in the garden

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Glover, VT



First grader Rachelle Miller and a friend inspect fresh produce ready to harvest in the Glover Community School garden.

(Host) Here's some food for thought. According to the Centers for Disease Control, one in five Vermont children is overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

The average American meal travels 1,500 miles from farm to plate. And over the past decade, Vermont has lost 80,000 acres-about 5% of its farmland.

But more and more schools here are trying to change all that, by getting kids to grow some of the healthy vegetables that end up on their lunch trays.

VPR's Charlotte Albright tagged along with a group of kids who call themselves "sprouts," in Glover.

(Albright) The Green Mountain Farm to School project took root about four years ago in Jay. Since then, another 14 Northeast Kingdom schools have signed on, giving elementary students year-round hands-on lessons in planning, growing, and harvesting vegetable gardens. Katherine Sims directs the outreach program from her office above a health food store in Newport. She says northeastern Vermont is a perfect place to grow this program, which gets both public funding and private donations.

(Sims) "You know, we all drive by the cornfields. But how many times do we stop and recognize that our farmers are producing food for us and that by supporting them we can support our own health and the health of our economy? And also the Northeast Kingdom has really high incidences of obesity rates and high population of low income students. So I think it's really important to be working here so we can bring fresh local foods to all of our community members."



Third grader Hayden Patrick helps bring the bounty from the Glover Community School garden to the cafeteria.

(Albright) On this warm, sunny afternoon, about 10 kids-they're called sprouts-straggle into the Glover Community School cafeteria and help themselves to apple juice, graham crackers, and string cheese - all store-bought. But in an hour or two, they'll be munching on produce they picked themselves, not far from their playground. Last spring, Rachelle Miller, a fifth-grader, helped plant tomatoes, carrots, broccoli, onions, Swiss chard, peppers, summer squash, sunflowers, wheat, and even watermelons.

(Miller) "Then we watered them, for good care, then we watered them every day after, and just talked about how long it takes them to grow up and so we can pick them."

(Albright) "Did you visit the garden this summer?"

(Miller) "Yes, I did."

(Albright) Turns out, she learned a lot, so when garden educator Julie Jack gives a little quiz, Rachelle can help another student answer the question, "What should not be composted: leaves, glass, coffee grounds, or fruit?"

Miller and students on compost:

"Where, like, you put leftover fruit, eggshells, yeah, and then you put worms in it and then the worms poop, which will come into soil, which will help your garden grow better."

(Albright) After the snack and quiz, the sprouts head for the garden, making a beeline for the tallest blooms on the horizon.

"You should see that huge sunflower." "Yeah, it's bigger than your head, isn't it?" "Nice job, Isaiah, that IS broccoli."

(Albright) Among the items on what Miss Julie calls their "garden shopping list."
. .broccoli."

(Jack) "Nice job, Isaiah, that IS broccoli. Let me sneak ahead of you."

(Student) "What DOES broccoli taste like?"

(Jack) "I see broccoli here, broccoli here, broccoli here, broccoli here. Someone, as I move my hand over, tell me when you'd want to eat the broccoli. What broccoli would you want to eat? So say, 'YUM,' when my hand is over the broccoli you'd want to eat."

(Students) "YUM! (eeeuw)YUM!"

(Jack) "Ooh, fine choice."

(Albright) The kids reject the over-ripe broccoli with yellow flowers, opting for the tighter, greener bunches. They also harvest tomatoes, carrots, Swiss chard, and a very small watermelon, and head back to school to wash their bounty. Finally, it's tasting time.

"Alexis, can you be a server for the broccoli? I love broccoli."

(Albright) If you thought you heard, through the noisy taste test, one surprised voice say, "I love broccoli," you heard right. Even though most of these kids live smack dab in the middle of the Northeast Kingdom's farm belt, a number of them had never eaten fresh broccoli, and a few didn't even know it for sure when they saw it in the garden. Glover Community School principal Dale Burnash says that's why he's happy to be a part of this growing statewide effort to bring fresh food into kids lives, and lunches. After all, he says, farming is part of this county's rich, but sadly fading, heritage.

(Burnash) "Here, what we are doing here is giving them a taste, a small taste of what our early ancestors had to do in order to survive."

(Albright) And, Burnash says, in uncertain economic times, growing their own food may become at least a part of what these hungry kids will have to do to survive in the future, as well. This winter, the sprouts program moves indoors, into the cafeteria, where the kids will learn more about cooking what they have grown and preserved. Already, Glover's cafeteria cook has been sneaking some fresh cherry tomatoes onto lunch trays, and she's heard very few complaints.

For VPR News, I'm Charlotte Albright, in Glover.

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