



A Brief History of School Gardens

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In 1909, Ventura, California schoolteacher Zilda M. Rogers wrote to the Agricultural Experiment Station at the University of California, Berkeley, then the flagship agricultural campus for California's land grant institution, and a primary proponent and provider of garden education resources for schoolteachers. Rogers wrote in some detail about how her school garden work had progressed, what the successes and failures were, how the children were responding to the opportunity to garden, how her relationship with the children had changed as a result of the garden work and what she saw as potential for the future. "With the love of the school garden has grown the desire for a home garden and some of their plots at home are very good? Since commencing the garden work the children have become better companions and friends?and to feel that there is a right way of doing everything?it is *our* garden?We try to carry that spirit into our schoolroom.?"

More than a hundred years after Rogers wrote those words, school gardens have continued to be cherished in the public school system in which she worked; Ventura Unified School District has developed a nationally recognized model that links school gardening, nutrition education and a farm-to-school lunch program featuring locally sourced fruits and vegetables for its 17,000 public school students.

Including the words written by schoolteacher Zilda Rogers, the University of California published Circular No. 46, which offered information about how to build school garden programs. School gardens were to be an integral part of primary schooling. As the circular declared, *‘The school garden has come to stay.’*



School gardens had been used in parts of Europe as early as 1811, and mention of their value preceded that by nearly two centuries. Philosophers and educational reformers such as John Amos Comenius and Jean-Jacques Rousseau discussed the importance of nature in the education of children; Comenius mentioned gardens specifically. The use and purpose of school gardens was multifold; gardens provided a place where youth could learn natural sciences (including agriculture) and also acquire vocational skills. Indeed, the very multiplicity of uses and purposes for gardens made it difficult for gardening proponents to firmly anchor gardening in the educational framework and a school’s curriculum; it still does. The founder of the kindergarten movement, Friedrich Froebel, used gardens as an educational tool. Froebel was influenced by Swiss educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi, who saw a need for balance in education, a balance that incorporated ‘hands, heart, and head,’ words and ideas that would be incorporated nearly two centuries later into the mission of the United States Department of Agriculture’s 4-H youth development program. Gardens required all three of these things; for this and other reasons, Froebel advocated for school gardens during the course of his life.

Late 19th century educators such as Maria Montessori and John Dewey built upon educational theories espoused by these earlier philosophers and reformers and extended them. Both Montessori and Dewey spoke specifically about gardening and agricultural education for youth. They both saw the acquisition of practical (i.e., vocational) skills as only part of the value of gardening experiences.

The U.S. school garden movement was much younger than its European predecessors; Europe led the way in the school garden movement. As early as 1869, a royal edict in Austria mandated that each school must provide a garden for its students. Similar movements supporting school gardens in Germany, Belgium, France, Russia and England followed this. The primary goal of the French school garden movement was to ‘inspire a love of country.’ In both World War I and II, the United States also sought to encourage youth to express their love of country and commitment to the nation’s wartime goals through Victory Garden



Perhaps one of the earliest school garden programs in the United States was developed in 1891, at the George Putnam School in Roxbury, Massachusetts. (Today, the nationally recognized Food Project also teaches youth about gardening and urban agriculture in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston). Like others interested in gardening, Henry Lincoln Clapp, who was affiliated with the George Putnam School, traveled to Europe for inspiration. After traveling to Europe and visiting school gardens there, he partnered with the Massachusetts Horticultural Society to create the garden at Putnam; the model was replicated around the state. It was followed in relatively short order by other efforts, including a well-known garden program in New York City: the DeWitt Clinton Farm School.

School gardens in America were a natural outgrowth of earlier community garden efforts, as well as civic and philanthropic work, much of which was conducted by women in urban settings. The civic and philanthropic bent of these gardening efforts were typically progressive in tone: they sought to correct or reform a wide range of perceived social, moral and educational agendas and advocated associative means. School gardens were one part of the broader nature-study movement. Interestingly, even home gardens worked by children of the household were considered school gardens; the term "school" took on a broader, Progressive meaning that defined "school" as any setting where youth learned through working. Historian Laura Lawson lists the various names included under the umbrella of the movement: "school gardens, school home gardens, children's gardens, school farms, farm schools, garden cities, and others." Many of these terms remain in use today.

Gardening became nearly a national craze during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era; "school" gardens enjoyed immense popularity. The United States Department of Agriculture estimated that there were more than 75,000 school gardens by 1906. As their popularity soared, advocates busily supplied a body of literature about school gardening and agricultural education. Women, reflecting the traditional location of gardening with the domestic sphere of reform work, authored some pieces. Louise Klein Miller's *Children's Gardens for School and Home, a Manual of Cooperative Learning* appeared in 1904, as the school garden movement was gaining real steam in the United States. Miller's book described two primary purposes of children's gardens: civic beautification and nature study, with the goal of instilling a love and appreciation of nature in youth (which would ultimately influence their civic character and "the public good?"). But Miller clearly saw educational purposes for children's gardens; in her acknowledgements, she thanks for his contributions Dr. William T. Harris, then the Federal Bureau of Education Commissioner.

Miller's book argued that school gardens were not a "new phase of education," but rather, an "old one" that was gaining merit for its ability to accomplish a wide variety of needs. School gardens were a way to reconnect urbanized American youth with their agrarian, producer heritage, the Jeffersonian idea of the sturdy yeoman farmer. And school gardens could help "Americanize" immigrant children, as well. Miller also argued for the importance of gardening education and nature study for both urban and rural youth, for "sociological and economic" reasons. Miller stated that one important reason to garden with urban youth was to teach "children to become producers as well as consumers," and for the possibility "of turning the tide of population toward the country, thus relieving the crowded conditions of the city." Other reformers echoed this idea, including Jacob Riis, who said, "The children as well as the grown people were "inspired to greater industry and self-dependence." They faced about and looked away from the slum toward the country."

Marie Louise Greene's *Among School Gardens* also became a standard book in the literature; it addressed the purposes of school gardens; gave information about the best school gardens and model programs; provided detailed and practical how-to information; and shared information about the quickly growing school garden movement in the United States. Greene's book relates the intense period of growth of the school garden movement between 1900-1910, describing the "chain of gardens, as it were, from the Atlantic to the Pacific?"

Greene's book provides an interesting glimpse into the developing school garden movement's Progressive reform purposes. Civic beautification, an important Progressive theme, was mentioned in Greene's work several times, with references to "decorative planting." One illustration employs the caption, "Boys should be Formed not Reformed," to provide information about the National Cash Register Company garden. Greene writes that the "underlying purpose of the teaching is threefold, educational, industrial and social "or moral?" The founder of the children's school farm at DeWitt Clinton Park in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York was quoted in Greene's book, saying:

"I did not start a garden to grow a few vegetables and flowers. The garden was used as a means to teach them in their work some necessary civic virtues, private care of public property, economy, honesty, application, concentration, self-government, civic pride, justice, the dignity of labor, and the love of nature?"



The school garden movement received a huge boost during

World War I, when the Federal Bureau of Education introduced the United States School Garden Army (you can read about that effort on my Victory Grower website). During the interwar years and the Great Depression, youth participated in relief gardening. During World War II, a second Victory Garden program swept the nation, but after that, school garden efforts became the exception, not the norm. The 1970s environmental movement brought renewed interest to the idea of school and youth gardening, and another period of intense growth began in the early 1990s. Interest in farm-to-school has continued to breathe life into the school garden movement, and some states, notably California, have developed legislation to encourage school gardens. (Under the tenure of State Education superintendent Delaine Eastin, a Garden in Every School program was begun. Under Jack O'Connell's tenure, [Assembly Bill 1535](#) [1], which funded school gardens, was approved).

We should all take note of the tagline for the U.S. government's youth gardening program in World War I: **?A Garden for Every Child. Every Child in a Garden.?** Wouldn't this be a great idea today? Instead of national educational programs such as ?Race to the Top,? why not advocate for a nationally mandated curriculum that promotes food systems education in American public schools, something like ?Race to the Crop?? When we fail to teach children about the food system, we leave all children behind. Some of the best models for school gardens lie in our past. But the real potential of school gardens to reduce obesity, encourage a healthy lifestyle, reconnect youth with the food system and to build healthier, vibrant communities is something we can do today?and is something that should be a national public policy thrust in the future.

A note to readers: Google Books contains copies of both [Miller](#) [2] and [Greene's](#) [3] books, as well as numerous other Progressive era books pertaining to gardening and agricultural education. To learn more about the United States School Garden Army's efforts during WWI (a GREAT model for a national curriculum today!), please visit groups.ucanr.org/victorygrower/files/47755.pdf

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