Fostering healthy diets in children through vibrant school gardens

Based on the Des Moines experience, these recommendations are offered to other school districts and FoodCorps service sites:

1. Start small and concentrate efforts.
2. Find advocates within the school. Select schools by identifying teachers or other staff who are willing to take leadership to connect nutritional education with garden-based activities that connect classroom curriculum to the garden.
3. Develop a regular schedule for activities that promote fresh food and gardening so that gardening and nutrition education becomes a regular part of the school schedule, which encourages teachers and local partners to plan, participate and take ownership.
4. Link school leaders to farm-to-school resources that make it easy for them to plan and conduct lessons around garden-based education.

What was done and why?

The project sought to embed school gardens in the everyday life of six Des Moines, Iowa, schools so they may serve as an effective teaching tool now and in the future. While they are simple to start, school gardens require consistent programming and school-wide support to succeed over the long term. Through weekly garden-based cooking lessons, monthly nutrition lessons, school-wide planting and harvest days and outreach to neighborhood partners, the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)’s FoodCorps (FC) AmeriCorps service members worked to make school gardens a vital part of the school community.

Project objectives were to:
1. Create “demonstration” gardens that model successful school garden programming.
2. Build an inter-school peer learning network.

What did we learn?

NCAT’s FC members in Des Moines conducted more than 736 educational activities, reaching at least 2,230 students. They harvested more than 400 pounds of produce from school gardens, serving about half in classrooms and school cafeterias and donating the rest to students’ and teachers’ families and to local food pantries. Seven Iowa farmers were introduced to schools through classroom presentations to students and through sourcing their fresh produce for tastings in classrooms and at the DMPS 2013 Summer Feeding Program lunch events. FC members also engaged 87 community volunteers, who cumulatively provided more than 400 hours of service in school garden-related activities. Two schools that were part of the project each were honored in 2013 as a “Healthier U.S. School.” In both award ceremonies, the FC members were acknowledged as contributors to creating a healthier school environment.