

Martha's Community Garden

FOCUS AREA: **ACADEMIC CONTENT**

October 1

World
Vegetarian
Day

Albuquerque WEPIC Initiative
United South Broadway Corporation
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Introduction

In order for after-school activities to support academic skill attainment, the activities must have some academic content. In the most successful activities, the academic skills are integral to the successful implementation of the activity—that is, participants need to apply the skills to do the activity. Activity leaders can seize these teachable moments to stress the importance of using literacy, math, and science concepts, which have been learned in class, in the activity. The activities provide an engaging context for practicing reading, using math skills, and understanding how science relates to everyday experiences.

How It Works

Martha's Community Garden is a year-long activity in which elementary (and some middle) school students design and nurture a community garden. Students work in groups on various gardening tasks: planning the layout, planting, garden maintenance, harvesting, and selling crops at a local market. Some groups use the produce grown in the garden in their cooking classes. Over the course of a year, between 50 and 75 students work in the garden project. Each group is assigned to the garden three times a week for 30 to 45 minutes each session.

AmeriCorps volunteers who are assigned to each group of "gardeners" lead the activity. They dis-

cuss making choices about appropriate fruits, vegetables, and flowers for the climate and soil conditions. Over the course of the year, participants and leaders learn a great deal about gardening and share in the pride of the harvest. The garden experience brings life to the classroom lessons on botany and agriculture. Students can pose and test hypotheses about which plants will thrive in the arid New Mexico climate. A senior citizen who is a master gardener attends regularly, sharing her passion for gardening and gently instructing the students on the care of the plants. Other seniors from the community also volunteer. Working in multiage groupings provides opportunities for peer mentoring and dividing chores according to abilities.

Some of the crops grown are sold in a local market, which allows participants to research pricing and invest proceeds into garden supplies. Other crops are used in the daily cooking class held at the program site. Recipe planning, based on which vegetables are currently ripe, calls on research skills. Negotiation skills come into play as the students decide what they want to plant and what they can plant. Should they focus on high-yield crops that will bring added dollars at the market? Do they want to grow things they personally like to eat? Should they plant flowers and focus on the aesthetic aspects of the garden?

Students' experiences in the garden activity prepare them for the popular Forest Restoration Program, which is for 14- to 25-year-olds. It involves

active participation in the restoring of local forest preserves and serves as a wonderful introduction to possible careers in forestry. Regardless of future career plans, the young people who participate in Martha's Community Garden develop lifelong skills and grow to have a keen appreciation of nature.

Questions to Consider

This gardening activity builds on academic content in math and science. How might you build in authentic literacy activities with a gardening project?

What are the challenges in implementing a gardening activity in an urban setting?

How important is it to have an expert—in this case, the master gardener—involved in a project? Can other staff duplicate the expert's knowledge, skills, and passion for the activity?

