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Gardening for Resilience at Infant Jesus School in Nashua

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Part 1 of 2





One of the ways that students at Infant Jesus School in Nashua are learning about ecological principles and preparing for the climate of the future is by gardening. Through time spent in their school garden, youngsters at IJS are encountering first-hand, during their crucial, formative years, Nature's beauty, energy, and mystery - and experiencing the important benefits of **stewardship**. Gardens have been established at the school because there is a shared belief that children are more likely **to care deeply** about the natural world if they understand that they themselves are truly part of it all and, if they can realize, as St. Francis so brilliantly explained in his *"Canticle of the Creatures,"* that the sun, air, water, plants and animals are all our brothers and sisters in God.

By doing various useful tasks and observing in the gardens, students reinforce their sense of connection with Nature and their awareness / consciousness that the environment is not just a 'thing' or 'object' to be exploited. Through their own actions and reflections, and their teachers' words and modeling, they start to appreciate Nature as a complex manifestation of God's evolving creation. By actually being outside, working with the plants, the tiny animals, and the other beings of the soil and air, their sense of fellowship with other life forms is enhanced and strengthened.

Recalling Jacques Cousteau's observation that: *"people protect what they love,"* students are offered frequent opportunities to exercise their inherent affinities and fascination with the wondrous realities of the living world: to experience Nature, not just through the filter of language and human-made media, but through first-hand interactions with the beings (green, scaled, feathered, etc...) that dwell in this vital realm.



We try to ensure that all of the students enjoy (if only through the microcosm of brief 'field trips' to the gardens or to the rows of plants on the table tops and window sills of the school's art / science room) the slow, yet rewarding, step-by-step process that goes into the cultivation of plants for food, health, beauty, or fragrance.

To accomplish these goals, members of the school community have been working for the past four years to transform the patches of ground around our 100 year-old building into a collection of small, organic, permaculture-inspired gardens.

Strawberries, pears, apples, lavender, thyme, lilies, coneflowers, roses, corn, beans, squash, milkweed, and many other plants are now growing here.



The varieties being cultivated have been chosen for their historic and symbolic associations. For example, there's a section focused on plants that were especially useful to the Native Americans of this region. Thus, tending and observing the corn, beans, and squash has become an integral part of the fourth graders' New Hampshire History curriculum.

Across all the grades, caring for plants links students to their own family histories. They learn that almost everyone's ancestors were farmers – if they look back just a few generations. This prompts meaningful conversations about work, family food customs, and grandparents' or parents' farms and / or vegetable gardens in Andhra Pradesh, Haiti, Quebec, or suburban Nashua.

Gardening helps youngsters appreciate their connections to – and potential roles in – essential traditions of localized food production, traditions that have contributed to regional self-sufficiency, biodiversity, and resilience across the millennia.



For older students in particular, gardening sparks discussions about nutrition, health, society, and the environment. As the teacher for the garden club, I try to help the youngsters understand more clearly the links between their personal well-being, food choices, and the health of the planet. After all, in the U.S, diet-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes are taking a tragic toll on people's lives even as the industrialized food production & distribution system (that generates this typical diet) contributes heavily to climate disruption, loss of biodiversity, displacement of small farmers, soil erosion, and 'dead zones' in the oceans.

By focusing on the benefits of raising foods locally, and using organic methods that both build soil fertility and embody principles of agro ecology (as in the use of renewables, conservation, the cultivation of multiple crops, the practice of raising both plants and animals, the avoidance of toxins, reliance upon long-term systems thinking, the empowerment of people, and the honoring of indigenous knowledge ~ source: <http://www.agroecology.org/Principles.html>), we can pass along to the youngsters an appreciation for, and vision of, the intricate and sustainable networks that characterize stable ecosystems - and the human societies which nest within.