

Walla Walla elementary students grow a connection to food and gardens

Kate Smith Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
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Brannon
Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin



Students Sofia Espana, left, and Fatima Sanchez-Lara, center, and classmates water plants in the student garden at Green Park Elementary school, May 2, 2023.

Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Green Park Elementary’s garden program started with a botanical call and response.

“Garden!” called garden education manager Nathan Brannon. “Party!” replied the chorus of second graders, following his instructions to sit in the shade on an 80 degree afternoon in early May.

“Our first garden job every time we come to the garden is to make sure the plants have water,” Brannon told the group.

He doled out instructions — fill the watering can with water from the plastic tubs in the garden and pour the water slowly, like a drip, so as not to dig up the plants already sprouting from the garden beds — and handed out bright green cups to the kids.

“We have sprinkler lines, but it's more about the habit,” he said as the kids ran to the garden, filled their cups and poured the water over young but recognizable lettuce, kale and tomato plants.

“Plus, what kid doesn’t want to play in water?”

Brannon gives the students a new challenge each week, hoping to teach them that they can take what they learn and apply it at home. Each lesson offers something they can carry forward and create themselves.

Burlap bags are used as weed barriers and soil containers. Greenhouse boxes, made by hand from scrap wood and plastic, sit in the farm sink at the edge of the plot.

Pairs of pants, knotted at the bottom and filled with dirt, hang along the outside of the fence. Nasturtiums are planted in the waistband, and beans will soon sprout from holes cut down the side.

“This is their garden. I try to keep them invested in it and try to keep it creative,” Brannon said. “The long term goal is to pick up what they do here and take it home.”

Green Park Elementary is one of four Walla Walla elementary schools with a garden program aimed at teaching students how to grow foods to live healthily and sustainably. The after school program empowers kids to find community with their classmates, the natural environment and the local food system, Brannon said.



Sofia Espana cools off while watering plants in the student garden at Green Park Elementary school, May 2, 2023.

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Jamila Ramirez-Garbutt waters some plants in the student garden at Green Park Elementary school, May 2, 2023.
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Farm to School

Erendira Cruz, executive director of the Sustainable Living Center, said there are currently school garden programs at four elementary schools — Berney, Edison, Green Park and Sharpstein — in Walla Walla.

The first school garden was built by volunteers at Sharpstein Elementary in 2007, and the nonprofit Walla Walla Valley Farm to School was created in 2015 to promote healthy communities through food, farms and gardening experience.

WWVF2S merged with the Sustainable Living Center in 2019.

Cruz said the program initially used a classroom approach, with science lessons and take home activities to teach students how to incorporate gardening into their everyday lives.

But with teachers putting the focus on education recovery in the wake of the pandemic, there was less interest in classroom lessons.

WWVF2S led a summer school program in 2021 and 2022 and switched to an after school program for the 2022-23 school year, Cruz said.



Instructor Nathan Brannon asks questions near the student garden at Green Park Elementary school, May 2, 2023.
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“After two summers, this year we won’t have a summer school program,” Crus said. “We’ll be taking a community approach instead.”

Families and community members can sign up to care for the garden during the summer months.

In the meantime, garden education managers lead after school programs weekly at each school, teaching students about gardening and food.

Gardening goals

Brannon, a comedian by trade, leads the weekly program at Green Park Elementary. He dove into the world of gardening as the pandemic shook up his 20-year career in comedy.

Looking to problem solve and contribute to his family shortly after they had relocated to Walla Walla, Brannon started a garden.

“Even though I didn't make a lot of money, I could save us money,” by growing food, he said.

Thinking about other people who may be in the same situation, he started sharing his experience on social media using the hashtag #EatHealthySaveMoney.

“I started putting that stuff out with the idea of exactly where I was,” he said. “You’ve got to start from somewhere, and the one thing you need is food.”



Student enthusiastically answer questions near the student garden at Green Park Elementary school, May 2, 2023.

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Brannon started as a garden education manager in 2021 after learning about WWVF2S.

“It was really a perfect fit because not only are they doing the exact same thing as me, but they were doing it on a much larger scale,” he said.

The goals of the program matched his own, and he was able to teach kids the tools he was using to support his own family.

“The goal is to maintain these gardens but in the long term to have the kids know how to take care of this garden, take care of it and have it eventually one day supplement their meals,” he said.

The program also creates a stronger relationship between the school cafeterias and local farms.

“We have a wonderful local agricultural community here,” he said. “It should be taken advantage of, and it's a great way to support those local farms.”

There's also a community aspect.

“It's getting the local community involved and invested in that same thing, getting the produce that's all around us, that grows close to us, and getting it to the kids,” he said.

Taste test

As the water from the kids' cups sank into the soil, Brannon called the students back to the circle in the shade. “Garden!” he said. “Party!” they replied.

It was time for the taste test, a weekly activity that introduces the group to new foods, often fresh, locally grown produce.

Kids remembered the snacks from recent weeks: juicy red tomatoes and crunchy rainbow carrots. But the taste test for the first week of May was a little different.

“What happens in the wintertime if you want a snack from the garden and everything's all cold and frozen?” Brannon asked the group. “What if we grabbed stuff when it's hot like this and made it so it'll last a long time?”



Students do a taste test while learning about dehydration near the student garden at Green Park Elementary

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Brannon asked the kids to make a bowl with their hands if they wanted to try dehydrated fruits and seeds, including banana chips, blueberries, pumpkin seeds and apple slices.

He took the kids through a series of questions with each taste test. What do you notice about the snack? What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it taste like?

“We just tasted a couple things that we can grow right there that we can use for a snack,” even outside of gardening season, Brannon said.

Many of the students asked for more of each treat.

Hydroponics and aquaponics

In addition to the outdoor garden plot, there are two hydroponic systems at Green Park Elementary, where plants are cultivated in a system with ever-flowing water.

Tomatoes, chard, beans and basil curl out of the plastic structures, illuminated by the fluorescent glow of a grow light.

Brannon leads a hydroponics club for fourth and fifth graders at Green Park Elementary and practices aquaponics himself.

Aquaponics is the combination of hydroponics with aquaculture or fish farming in a self-sustaining, balanced system that uses 90% less water than gardening in the ground.

It's a complex process to get the system just right, but it's a great alternative for those who don't have a place to plant in soil, for those in urban areas where soil quality has been compromised or for those who have limited access to clean water.

Brannon predicts aquaponics will become an ever more critical piece of the agriculture industry, especially in areas where drought issues are a constant.

"I practice that a lot because there's so many sustainable aspects to it, there's so many financial aspects to it, empowering aspects just like with regular gardening," he said. "My goal is to make it as accessible as possible."

Though the systems the school purchased might be out of the realm of possibility for most families, Brannon teaches students how to build a system from everyday items.

"Everyone should know how to do this, the same way everyone should know how to grow in a pot," he said. "It should be accessible to everybody, fresh food and all that."

Brannon sees gardening as a way to teach kids how to take more control of their own destiny, he said.

"I want them to know about plants, but I also want them to be able to do for their families what I was trying to do for mine," he said.

Planting seeds

Brannon, holding up a bag of peanuts, gave out one more job before dismissing kids from the after school program.

"These are not what we're going to eat. These are what we're going to plant so that we get a ton of them when it gets all cold," he said.

He instructed the students to dig a hole, drop the peanut in and cover it again with soil to start the growing process. The peanuts had been soaked in water for a day already, Brannon said.

Before passing out the seeds, he quizzed the students about peanut plants.

"Has anyone seen a peanut plant before? It looks like a little bush," he said. "The peanuts grow underground. Then you pull it up and then you collect all the peanuts when they're all grown."

Then he handed out the seeds for the kids to plant in the garden plot. A handful of students came back to get more, and some put the seeds in their pockets, hoping to plant them at home and watch them grow.

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