

FRESH from the Garden

Teacher Feature



Parents attending curriculum night at Pitts School Road Elementary, Concord, couldn't resist purchasing a cup of water from the "Garden Refresh-MINT" stand. Students manned the lemonade-like stand, selling mint-infused water, made from mint grown in the school garden, of course. The fundraiser is just one project to ensure garden sustainability. It's been just over a year since Erika Currin, 1st grade teacher at Pitts School Road Elementary, secured a grant that turned a grassy courtyard into a dynamic school garden. We talked with Erika in late September, asking her to share her reflections on how the garden has impacted Pitts and how their experiences may inspire others.

Q: What were some pleasant surprises?

A: Our yield! We were especially surprised by the number of strawberries we harvested (they were prettier and juicier than some of our local

strawberry farms). Birds tried to thwart our harvest, but Amy and Doug suggested netting and that did the trick. Besides that, we were surprised at how easy it was to grow and maintain the strawberries. Extra produce allowed us to help others, too. We donated two 2-gallon buckets of radishes and at least 10 bags of lettuce to a local food pantry. With our season extenders, we were harvesting lettuce up until Christmas break.

Also, the students were excited to complete any activities related to the garden, even when not directly in the garden; activities such as planning the beds, seeding with paper towels (which makes planting with little ones SO much easier), or making smoothies in the garden room. One special event for our 5th graders was a "cooking show" presented by Dole chef, Mark Allison. He made a salad that everyone was eager to taste and hosted a cooking challenge for teams of students. We have three 5th graders who now have an imaginary cooking competition at recess each day because they've gotten excited about the fruits and vegetables growing in our garden. They interview each other about what they are cooking and how it was grown. It is the cutest thing ever!

Several parents have reported that they have been surprised when their children request salad for dinner because they've enjoyed eating lettuce from the garden. Students have enjoyed eating new veggies that might not have been familiar to them, like bok choy, arugula, Swiss chard, and peppermint beets.



[Read the rest of our interview with Erika about her garden experiences.](#)



In the Garden Now



Plant

Outdoor planting is pretty much over for the fall. You might sneak in some last minute mature transplants of lettuce, kale, spinach, collards and kohlrabi.

Empty beds do not have to lay fallow. Sow a cover crop of clover by simply broadcasting the seeds. This will grow through winter and can be turned over two weeks before planting.

The next opportunity for planting will be sowing sweet peas in early February...mark your calendar! Of course, you can grow herbs indoors in a bright window. Or you might want to [borrow one of our light banks](#) to use in the classroom.

Harvest

If you got an early start, then it's harvest time! As students harvest root crops remind them to shake off any excess soil attached to the root back into the garden bed.

Be sure to demonstrate proper harvest technique. Don't assume that students know how to harvest. Point out that some plants, like cauliflower, cabbage and radishes, are "one and done," while others, like broccoli and most leafy greens continue to produce and can be harvested many times. Do you need some harvest guidance? [We've got you covered.](#)

Last call for sweet potato harvest...the first frost will be just around the corner.

Maintenance

Be prepared for the first frost by installing your season extender hoops, inspecting your frost blanket and getting sandbags ready. Plenty of sandbags around each bed to secure the frost blanket will prevent the wind from tearing it.

Continue to monitor irrigation needs daily. Be sure to check below the surface since morning dew may make the top layer of soil wet, while the root zone remains dry.

Continue to monitor for pests. Cabbage worms, cutworms, army worms, rabbits, and even deer are common fall pests in the garden.

Freshness Tip: If possible, most above-ground crops (leafy greens, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage) should be stored in a refrigerator immediately after harvest to maintain freshness. While all produce, even organic produce, should be washed prior to preparing or eating, it is best not to wash prior to storage. To keep leafy greens at their best in the fridge, wrap them with a paper towel. The paper towel absorbs excess moisture that can lead to bacterial growth.



Resource Spotlight

[Growing Minds Farm to School](#) is part of the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP), based in Asheville, NC. You can print a weekly garden activity guide from their website dubbed [This Week In the Garden](#) (or TWIG), or you can download and customize the newsletter using Publisher. You can even print the entire year's worth of TWIGs to reference each week. Each issue includes a crop feature, suggested activities, a book of the week, journal prompts and a recipe. [Check out the first week of October.](#)



Also worth exploring is the [Farm to School Bookshelf of Children's Literature](#). The list includes more than 600 titles! You can sort by title, author, subject, grade level or specific tags.



Quick Tip



Consider adding a **Digging Bed** to your existing garden. Maybe you're asking, "What is a digging bed? Don't we dig in all of the beds?" A digging bed is a bed that is never planted, but provides an open, yet contained area for digging in the soil. It can be a station in your garden routine, a place for students who are struggling with self-control to work out their frustrations and reset, or just a quiet place for a student to learn about and

explore the wonders of soil.

Jenna Mobley, Life Lab Teacher Trainer, says, "Our kids, PreK - 3rd grade particularly, love our digging beds. We like to divide our digging beds into four sections for different soil types and particle sizes. Typically we'll have clay, sand, pebbles/gravel mix, in addition to a mixed soil."

You may even want to hide small treasures for students to find as they explore in the digging bed. If you don't have an unplanted bed to set aside for digging, a [fabric raised bed](#) can be an inexpensive alternative.

[Learn more about the benefits of digging.](#)

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Questions? Contact us!

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