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Vic High students get hands dirty in school garden

Jeff Bell — Times Colonist



City Harvest Co-operative's Heather Parker, second from right, plants squash on Tuesday with Vic High students, from left: Dani Birge, Alexis Cumpstone, Sterling Beeston and Eden Murray. — BRUCE STOTESBURY

Neatly kept beds full of carrots, lettuce, herbs and more fill a corner of the grounds at Victoria High School.

The garden has been taking shape for the past four years, but has really taken off since September. A school soup day in January was fuelled by garden produce, while today's lunch — an event called Field to Fork — will focus on garden-fresh salads.

The garden is a regular source of greens for the school's ongoing lunch program, as well.

"We wanted to start bringing fresh, nutritious food to kids and also for them to see how it's grown, that they could do this," said teacher Asha Rao, who has been spearheading the garden effort. "We decided we need to make this more of a teaching tool and a place where kids could see that they could get food from."

Gardens have become popular additions at a number of schools, Rao said.

“This is probably the biggest one in the district.”

Part of the plan at Vic High has been to take advantage of a cafeteria facility that wasn't being fully utilized.

Rao said students from all over the school, including members her life-skills class for students with special needs, have been donating their time to various aspects of gardening and food production.

“We wanted to get the kids more involved in the cooking and have more partnership with the community.”

The community has stepped up with plenty of support, said Shellie Gudgeon, whose Harbourside Rotary Club of Victoria has led the way. Sysco Victoria donated thousands of dollars worth of staples for the cafeteria, Tower Fence provided fencing and City Harvest Co-operative has provided expertise. Fairway Markets has also been involved.

Along with that, a Farm to School Grant of \$4,000 was obtained from the Capital Regional Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable.

One of the students who frequents the garden is Eden Murray, a 16-year-old in Grade 10 who said she is learning a lot from being there.

“I love to garden and I'm also really passionate about leadership, learning leadership skills,” she said. “So this garden has been a really great place for me to engage with both those subjects.”

Eden said she is especially keen on the First Nations medicine-wheel gardens at the site. “They all have medicines and herbs that are native to this territory.”

Gudgeon, owner of Il Terrazzo restaurant, has been able to use her connections in the restaurant business to help the garden project and the cafeteria along. Local chefs have prepared food alongside students, with Kevin McNeil from Famous Original on hand to help out today.

Ideally, students will build connections with the chefs and have a link to getting jobs, Gudgeon said.

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