

+ Montana Farm to School Successes



Growing Farm to School in Hinsdale

By: Greta Hensler, Montana Dietetic Intern

Patti Armbrister, agriculture teacher and FFA adviser at Hinsdale School, has made incredible progress in her school garden to cafeteria project. Hinsdale, located in the plains of Northeastern Montana, is now on the map thanks to Patti's determination!

In the Garden

Patti began her efforts in 2009; several gardens have been added over the years. Thanks to cardboard mulch, and lots of help from the school kids, the soil is now very fertile, uses less water, grows faster, and has a more plentiful yield. She has used mulching and school-made compost to not only grow better crops, but also help kids grow in their knowledge of horticulture. She makes gardening fun!



After preparing the soil, the kids then plant seeds in the gardens, as well as in their own individual pots. They water, weed, and watch them grow. At the end of the growing season, each child has a fruit or vegetable plant that they can be proud to call their own.

Hinsdale School's first garden project was the

passive solar greenhouse, which was funded by several grants including National FFA, Food For All, Qwest, mini-grants, and community support. The solar greenhouse not only extends Montana's growing season, but also has a zero energy bill. Four 4 foot by 16 foot plots comprise these raised gardens, as well as three low tunnels of 4 foot by 12 foot garden, and two in-town plots.

Since 2011, these gardens provide the fresh fruits and vegetables that the kids eat in the cafeteria, all grown right on school grounds. Right now, the gardens grow tomatoes, cucumbers, summer and winter squash, peppers, potatoes, garlic, and carrots, much of which is used fresh on the salad bar from August to November. The root vegetables are used throughout the year.

Patti teaches 34 students in grades 7-12 who all get hands-on experience in the gardens. She also teaches workshops to students in grades K-6, as well as provides each child from grades K-8 with a planter pot of their very own. This gives the children the sense of pride and accomplishment in growing something from seed to plate. The agriculture class students have also been able to learn valuable engineering skills by constructing

For More Information:

Aubree Roth
Farm to School Coordinator
406-994-5996
aubree.roth@montana.edu

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More information available at www.opi.mt.gov/Farm2School
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the solar greenhouse and mason bee structures. The bee boxes house native pollinators, which are essential to the plants throughout the garden.

Youth & Community Engagement

Another great aspect of Patti's success is engaging the kids. She surveyed the students on what they would like to see in the garden and in their school meals. The results: Kids wanted to eat more local meats, raspberries, cherry tomatoes, and potatoes. The school cooks listen to the kids' preferences, and help bring healthy foods from garden to plate.

Patti extends learning beyond the garden. A few years ago, the 7th and 8th graders researched the number of miles beef traveled to reach their plate. The calculation came out to 2,700 miles! When Patti discovered the high beef travel distance, she decided to take action. The school is now sourcing local beef from Montana.

Patti's students have achieved several accomplishments. They have been state winners in science fairs, and house the state winning floriculture team who is competing at the National FFA Floriculture CDE this October and the district first place Agronomy team. The outdoor classroom and FFA won the EcoStar Award for two years. These school achievements demonstrate Patti's work in the classrooms and gardens is a huge benefit to the students and the community.

The students recently hosted a grandparent's day, where much of the local produce they have been growing was served. 150 people attended, which is almost as many people as live in the town of Hinsdale.

Patti believes that having the cooks, school board, superintendent, county sanitarian, alumni, grandparents, and community members involved have been key to the Garden to Cafeteria's success.



Garden to Cafeteria

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Patti has had the opportunity to further educate school foodservice workers. She once cooked in the kitchen herself, so understands many of the day-to-day challenges. Patti keeps the cooks up to speed with the latest and greatest in the culinary world, and realizes the importance of making healthy cooking as easy as possible.

One goal Patti has for the Garden to Cafeteria project is attaining adequate storage for garden produce. She would like a two-compartment root cellar to store the school's potatoes, garlic, onions, and pears throughout the fall. Additional walk-in refrigerators and freezers could store local produce and bulk meats. Funding is a major obstacle, since the freezer/fridge project alone would cost over \$10,000. Once funded this investment would save significant energy costs, because the units would be much more efficient than the present system.

Patti has been dedicated to the Garden to Cafeteria project since day one. There have been many obstacles she has had to overcome, such as tight budgets, anti-change community members, and poor soil. Backed by students, faculty, and the community, Patti has made Garden to Plate a golden success story. Patti states it best when she says the projects have turned "wasteland into a gorgeous garden of Eden."

See more photos and read stories on the Hinsdale Outdoor Classroom Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/hinsdaleoutdoorclassroom>.



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