

Cultivating Education & Community *in a School Garden*

BY SHELLEY JOYER & CHRISTY CALDERON

It was the spring of 2022, when we first met in the school garden. I was walking to the car after school when I noticed another mom working in the garden beds. I leaned over the fence and suggested adding trellises to the garden. She called back, "I think that would be a great thing for you to do!" An amazing friendship began, and we have been working together in the school garden ever since.

We are Christy Calderon and Shelley Joyer — two moms who grew up surrounded by gardening. Our parents and grandparents instilled in us a love for plants and the outdoors. The initial vision for the garden came from Christy. The garden is the first thing you see when you pull into the elementary school, and Christy's goal was to transform it into a welcoming and rewarding space — one that sparked joy and drew people in. At the time, it was enclosed by a chain-link fence full of mint, weeds, and overgrown perennials. We jumped in shovel first and decided that we needed a mission statement: "Our goal is to cultivate a love for nature while fostering environmental stewardship through hands-on learning and creativity. Together, we hope to grow a sustainable future, inspire curiosity, and have fun in the process!"

It was a lot of work and trial and error, but we quickly learned that it was OK to ask for help. We didn't have to do all the heavy lifting on our own — literally. We collaborated with community members to upgrade and build out areas of the garden that needed attention. We revived the 4' x 20' redwood planters, added a working sink to wash hands and produce, built tables, and added colorful chairs. Staying true to the idea that the garden was a warm and welcoming spot for everyone, we created our own hand-painted signs with inspirational quotes and motivational garden puns. ▸





Gardening Tips & Tricks

- We plant multiple types of salvia and butterfly bushes in our native plant garden to attract bees and hummingbirds. We also line many of our gardens with marigolds to deter insects.
- Our school garden experiences extremely hot summers and mild winters. During the summer, we ensure adequate hydration for all plants, but not too much! We also take care of ourselves by wearing sunhats and sunscreen, and we provide shady areas for the students to congregate.
- Bev Bos, a pioneer in early childhood education, said it best: "If it hasn't been in the hands and the body, it can't be in the brain." We believe the students' hands are one of the most important tools in the garden. Of course we use shovels, rakes, etc., but we accomplish so much by just getting our hands dirty.
- For one of our monthly lessons, students test the soil to determine what nutrients and/or what amendments are needed before we plant the next season's crop. Keeping the soil healthy in turn keeps our plants healthy and producing.
- For beginning gardeners, we recommend succulents, cacti, or herbs. Our herb garden has an abundance of lemongrass, rosemary, oregano, thyme, and basil, which have done well with minimal attention. On a larger scale, azaleas or iceberg roses are relatively easy flowering plants, as they aren't bothered by insects and are hard to ruin.

In the garden, students not only learn about plants and nature but also develop important social-emotional skills. It's a space where they can connect with each other in a relaxed, supportive environment, building friendships while learning to work together. The act of caring for the garden encourages mindfulness, patience, and a sense of responsibility, all of which help nurture their emotional well-being. For many students, the garden becomes a refuge — a place where they feel heard, valued, and more confident.

We searched for a curriculum to guide our lessons in the garden, but couldn't find exactly what we wanted, so we decided to create our own. Our goal was to make it educational so students could learn about topics such as integrated pest management, soil types, vermin-composting, pollinators, and more. To ensure we were well-equipped, we graduated from the UC Davis Master Gardener program to become experts in the subjects we wanted to teach.





The students range from transitional kindergarten to fifth grade, with each class visiting the garden once a month for a lesson. Two parents from each class volunteer their time as "Garden Docents" and administer the lessons to the class. While class participation isn't mandatory, we have 100% involvement because teachers recognize the value of having their students outdoors, learning about farm-to-fork concepts and how to be environmental stewards. One fun activity we've created is our quarterly lunch pop-ups. During lunch, we use produce from the garden to prepare dishes like cilantro rice, kale smoothies, nut-free pesto, and tomatillo salsa, to name a few. It's always exciting to see the students' enthusiasm as they enjoy the food they helped grow. >



Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the garden has been the sense of community it has fostered. It has created a space that inspires people to gather. Members of the community — both those within and outside the school — have come together to help create something beautiful. Neighbors stop by to chat over the fence, families spend time enjoying the garden, and students find it to be a calming, peaceful place. Local restaurants have volunteered their time to cook food for the students based on what is fresh and growing in the garden. Our school's Head of Facilities volunteered to manage our vermin-composting program. He has the students collect their food scraps from lunch, and brings a small group every day to feed the worms. There is nothing better than to hear their squeals of excitement getting to be a part of this activity. >



As you enter the school garden today, you pass through a redwood and hog-wire fence, now extended to include a 17-tree orchard. Depending on the season, the planter beds contain a vibrant mix of produce. Our journey is ongoing, and with each new experience, we continue to learn: mint should always be planted in its own pot; squirrels and rabbits love butter lettuce and sunflower seeds; planting two blueberry bushes together yields more fruit; and snap peas make a perfect garden snack.



We've grown alongside the garden and now look forward to helping others who are eager to embark on a similar gardening journey. While it might feel overwhelming at times, our advice to anyone starting their own school garden is simple: just begin. It doesn't have to be large; even a single garden bed is enough to spark joy and create a space of learning that students will cherish for life. The effort is worth it. For us, it only took a few motivated moms to get things rolling and put the systems in place. And yes, in case you're wondering, we do have trellises in our school garden now!

Christy Calderon and Shelley Joyer founded "Let's Grow! Education" after recognizing the need for students to engage in outdoor learning and realizing they needed to develop the curriculum themselves. They believe in the importance of hands-on experiences, where students not only get their hands dirty but also learn about the origins of their food. Their goal? To help plant school gardens across the state, one tomato at a time. To learn more, visit letsgroweducation.com and Instagram (@betweentwoshubs).

Photography by D. Ullian Photography (dillianphotography.com).