

"Federation Corner" column
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Public school gardens and the local food movement

by Paula Bienenfeld, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

School vegetable gardens are cropping up all over the United States, and have been encouraged by the U. S. Department of Agriculture and most recently by First Lady Michelle Obama, inspired in part by the local food movement.

One of the earliest proponents of these gardens was Chez Panisse owner and chef Alice Waters, who in 1994 worked with her local King Middle School in Berkeley, California to begin 'The Edible Schoolyard.' Since then the school vegetable garden idea has spread throughout the country, including in neighboring Frederick County, and the District of Columbia, where the Safeway Corporation recently announced its new partnership with D. C. Public Schools to help finance and support ten healthy school gardens throughout the District.

Unfortunately, in a February 26 memo this year, School Superintendent Jerry Weast prohibited the growing of vegetable gardens on the grounds of public schools in Montgomery County.

Montgomery Victory Gardens and the Montgomery County Master Gardener Association have joined together to send a letter to the Board of Education asking that the prohibition on healthy school gardens be overturned. You can read the entire letter at www.montgomeryvictorygardens.org. It reads, in part:

"Across the country, schools are adopting vegetable gardens because of the multiple benefits they provide to children, their families and their communities. Even more than the other types of gardens currently approved by MCPS, vegetable gardens provide a rich learning laboratory where almost any academic subject can be taught, from science and math to art, history, social studies, and cultural studies. Vegetable gardens can build environmental understanding and stewardship among young people, so critical in our age of multiple environmental threats. In addition, working in vegetable gardens provides children a healthy physical activity, and opportunities for positive and enriching social development and community engagement. Increasingly these findings are being documented in the research literature.

"School vegetable gardens are also terrific places to teach, encourage, and model healthy lifestyle and eating habits. As you also know, we have a skyrocketing epidemic of childhood obesity, and 1 out of every 3 children born after 2000 are expected to develop diabetes at some point in their life. One crucial way to address this crisis is by encouraging children and families to develop healthy eating habits early by consuming more fresh fruit and vegetables. To this end, it is hard to imagine a better use for a small part of school grounds than for a vegetable garden, or any better activity for kids than to spend an hour or two during a school week involved with such a garden.

"What we are asking is that the MCPS Administration review proposals from schools that want to start vegetable gardens, and approve those demonstrating the necessary commitment along with an appropriate plan. As parents, citizens, and community activists in Montgomery County, we pledge our commitment to help these schools achieve success in the highly beneficial and positive activity of food gardening."

Gordon Clark, Project Director of Montgomery Victory Gardens, has asked the public to support the effort. The Civic Federation's Executive Committee has agreed that our membership should vote on the issue of whether to encourage the Board of Education to allow healthy vegetable gardens on the grounds of county public schools. To this end, the following resolution will be introduced for consideration at the June 14 MCCF meeting.

“Whereas promoting healthy gardens teaches our children to lead active healthy lives and enforces a connection between the food we grow and the food we eat; and

“Whereas school gardens are promoted by USDA because they are a great way to teach children about caring for plants, how fruits and vegetables grow, and about healthy eating; and

“Whereas Superintendent Jerry Weast issued a February 26, 2010 memorandum disallowing growing such gardens; and

“Whereas the Montgomery County Board of Education has enforced this memo;

“Therefore, be it resolved that the Montgomery County Civic Federation supports the efforts of Montgomery Victory Gardens and the Montgomery Master Gardener Association to encourage healthy vegetable gardens on public school property; supports removing any obstacles that prevent food gardens from being planted on school grounds; and encourages the development of healthy vegetable gardens on our public school properties.”

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net