

# A Garden of Learning

Morton Ranch Elementary grows lifelong learners with campus garden

*Written by Noreen Stavinoha  
Photography by Kristyn Robertson*

Morton Ranch Elementary student Isaha picks lettuce in the school's garden with help from his teacher Kim Czubara



Gathered around a patch of soil and armed with gardening gloves and trowels, students at Morton Ranch Elementary gaze proudly at their classroom projects: Daisies, rosemary, lettuce, and broccoli are just a few of the many plants they have grown and nurtured throughout the year in their school garden. New ideas about the ways students learn and connect prompted Principal Elisa Farris, science coordinator Kimberly Czubara, and science teacher Cheryl Lawler to start the learning gardens in 2011.

“I have noticed our students are so ‘plugged in’ technologically, that they’re really missing opportunities to be outside playing in nature,” says Farris. “Studies have shown the dramatic difference nature and opportunities for learning outdoors can make for children with attention or emotional issues and for regular kids. To be outside to wonder and question and be curious affects them as human beings, and that’s what we’re really dreaming of for them.”

### Lush with Lessons

The gardens are a mix of floral, vegetable, and herb plants that appeal to the senses. When it came time to plant each seed and seedling, Farris was surprised to discover that some of her students had never used a shovel before, so that was lesson one. Then they moved on to the messy part, and students discovered that digging in the soil with their hands and placing the seeds or seedlings at just the right depth was a lot of fun.

The process of getting each plant to maturity takes focus, patience, and cooperation, and with the help of their teachers, students visibly grow in those areas. Appreciation for what it takes to put food on the table is an asset they will carry with them throughout their lives. And finally, there is the sense of accomplishment that comes from a new-found skill when it’s time to harvest.

“The students are very excited about the gardens,” shares Czubara, who has helped lead the garden activities. “They know exactly which flower or vegetable they planted, and many check on the growth of those plants daily. They are excited about helping – whether it is planting, watering, or harvesting – and they ask many questions about things they wouldn’t otherwise be exposed to at school.”

### Growing Healthy Habits

The first vegetable to reach maturity in the initial crop was lettuce, and in January students harvested enough to make a small salad for every student in the school during lunch one

day. Each grade level has certain boxes assigned to them, and when the vegetables are harvested, they will be given to the students responsible for those particular boxes to enjoy.

One bonus of the gardens has been that children are willing to try more varieties of vegetables when they’ve had a hand in growing them, which can lead to healthier choices in their diets. “When we ate the salad made from the lettuce we grew, some students had never had salad before, but tried – and liked – ours,” says Czubara. “Many asked for seconds, so hopefully, we are beginning to build healthy eating habits. Many students asked if we could have our garden’s salad again the next day!”

### Taking Root in the Community

The gardening idea has become a popular one outside the school, as well. Quite a few of the students now have

gardens at home, and they are quick to tell you about them. Jessilyn has planted a vegetable garden with her mom, and she says the best thing about gardening is simply, “Being with my mom.” Valerie planted flowers with her mom, who told her, “If we take really good care of them, they will light up our house with great colors.”

Artemio’s father had a most unusual idea when he planted sunflowers with Artemio. He made it a treasure hunt and said that when the flowers had been planted, Artemio should



Students shared the lettuce they harvested with every student in the school, making small salads during lunch one day



Johan, Jeff, Justin, Rogan, and Corey tend the vegetables in the garden.



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Mark & Allyson Hoag with their children

check where the sun cast a shadow similar to the position of 7:30 on a clock. Artemio took good care of the plants so they would grow and at the end of two hours, he found the treasure: a book about plants.

### Branching Out

Students and teachers at MRES have more big plans in store for their little patch of earth. Farris would like to see an alphabet garden for kindergarten and pre-K students, where wooden stakes topped with each letter of the alphabet mark sections holding plants starting with the same letter.

“This project is just the beginning of what we would like to have our students experience,” shares Czubara. “Our hopes for the MRES garden are growing, along with the imaginations of the children, as we continue to watch both our garden and our students bloom!” KM

*NOREEN STAVINOHA lives in Katy with her husband and miniature schnauzer and loves to tell the stories of interesting people.*



Giselle proudly displays the lettuce she helped grow this year