

Gardens for Learning 2017 Report



Offering hands-on gardening, nutrition, and cooking activities to nurture a foundation for life-long healthy habits and positive attitudes toward food.



Acknowledgements

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This program would not be possible without the commitment and dedication of the Site Coordinators who brought to life the Gardens for Learning program at nine sites across the state in 2016. We also extend gratitude to all of the sites' dedicated staff and families for their participation and for making the program a success:

- Alanna Ojibway, Upper Valley Haven, White River Junction
- Beth Ridley, St. Johnsbury School, St. Johnsbury
- Christine Gatti-Palance, Boys and Girls Club, Rutland
- Deidre Hodgson, Family Center of Washington County, Montpelier
- Joann Darling and Leslie Rusters, Green Acres Apartments and Highgate Apartments, Barre
- Leah Britch and Virginia Holiman, Highgate Public Library, Highgate
- Melissa Gibson and Lianne Trombley, Richford Health Center, Richford
- Renee Hinton, Orange County Parent Child Center, Tunbridge

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The Vermont Community Garden Network (VCGN) is dedicated to the growth and success of community and school gardening across Vermont. Since 2001, VCGN has helped start and sustain hundreds of gardens all over Vermont and has connected thousands of children, teens, and adults to fresh, healthy food and sustainable food production practices. VCGN provides training, technical assistance, resources, and networking opportunities for garden leaders around the state and hands-on garden education for youth and adults.



12 North Street, Suite 5
Burlington, VT 05401
802.861.4769
www.vcgn.org
f VTGardenNetwork
VT.Gardens

On the cover: Morning garden chores at Green Acres Apartments included harvesting green beans for a salsa recipe; extra green beans were packed up for children to take home.

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A pop-up tent provides shade for youth to participate in a food preparation activity directly in the garden at Highgate Apartments

Executive Summary

Gardens for Learning is a grant and technical assistance program that provides a unique opportunity for participating communities to support summer gardening, nutrition, and cooking programs for children at risk of summertime hunger. In the gardens, kitchens, and play spaces, youth develop the skills and self-confidence to grow their own food, learn first-hand how to cook, and experience the satisfaction of cooperatively working with others to build the foundation for life-long healthy habits and positive community interaction. By learning how to grow their own food in an engaging and supportive environment and using that food to make healthy snacks, the children are not only changing their own habits, but increasing their families' overall food security.

The Gardens for Learning program is held at three distinct types of sites, all reaching food insecure families across the state - affordable housing sites, schools, and community centers. Each site is responsible for planning its own program and tailoring hands-on activities to suit the needs of youth participants, within the framework of the Gardens for Learning educational standards. Our role is to offer Site Coordinators the resources and guidance they need so that they in turn can best serve their communities. We provide six months of ongoing support through training retreats, site visits, technical assistance, and bimonthly newsletters. Site Coordinators follow weekly reporting requirements that allow our Gardens for Learning Statewide Coordinator to keep track of summertime activities and comprehensively assess the program's impact. With each season of the Gardens for Learning grant program, we are strengthening a statewide network of garden educators who run meaningful summer programs for children.



Youth gather around an outdoor cooking station and take turns peeling and slicing zucchini at the Richford NOTCH Playground summer camp, hosted by the Richford Health Center

The Vermont Community Garden Network has successfully completed a third year of running the Gardens for Learning program that was founded by Food Works at Two Rivers Center. We welcomed four new sites to join five returning sites, for a total of nine sites receiving grant award packages. Some sites held a four-week-long summer camp, with children participating all four weeks; other sites had weekly or daily participation. Summer programs at the nine sites were scheduled over a span of 10 weeks, with 80-150 children participating each week.



Deidre assists toddlers at the Family Center of Washington County to rinse off freshly harvested carrots

We saw significant behavior change in eating habits as a result of children participating in gardening activities. The mother of a young boy at Green Acres Apartments shares her observation:

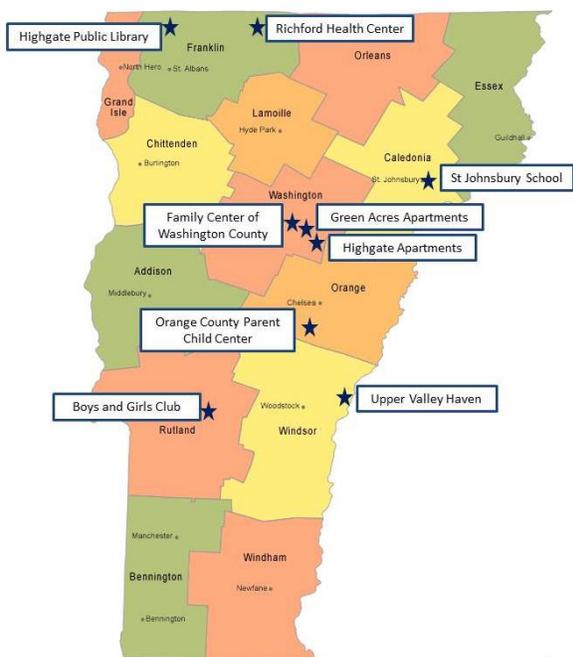
“My son never ate green beans, but when he brings a bag home that he picked from the gardens, he can’t wait for us to both sit down together to eat them.”

We heard similar anecdotes from other parents, Site Coordinators, and from the children. Our program assessment is consistent with research showing that children who grow their own food are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables and to show higher levels of knowledge about nutrition.

Inspired by best practices in cooking with children, this year we awarded each site a “Gardens for Learning supply box” which included a selection of child-friendly kitchen tools such as a salad spinner and vegetable spiralizer. Site Coordinators were grateful for having tools to make food preparation accessible and fun for all ages. Furthermore, we noticed a trend towards setting up outdoor cooking stations in gardens at five out of the nine program sites. Our documentation of resourceful strategies and practical tips for cooking with children will be included in the annual update of the Site Coordinator Handbook.

As we look towards 2017, we will emphasize key factors that enhance the impact of Gardens for Learning summer programs. For example, our program assessment shows that tailoring activities to a targeted age range and planning garden designs in direct connection to lesson plans can increase youth engagement and experiential learning. The Vermont Community Garden Network strongly believes that summertime programs focused on hands-on activities in gardens and kitchens address the need for increasing food access and nutrition education in communities across Vermont.

Programs at a Glance



- **Gardens for Learning sites: 9**

Housing sites / Housing shelter

- Green Acres Apartments
- Highgate Apartments
- Upper Valley Haven

School / Early Childhood Care Centers

- Family Center of Washington County
- Orange County Parent Child Center
- St. Johnsbury School

Community centers

- Boys and Girls Club of Rutland
- Highgate Public Library
- Richford Health Center

- **Average number of weeks for individual summer programs: 5.8**
- **Average age of participants: 6**
- **Site Coordinator retreats: 2**
- **Site visits by the Statewide Coordinator: 13**



Total number of youth participating during the sample week of July 11-15: 154

** The sample week was selected out of 10 weeks when programs were in session*



Total number of healthy snacks served during sample week of July 11-15: 239

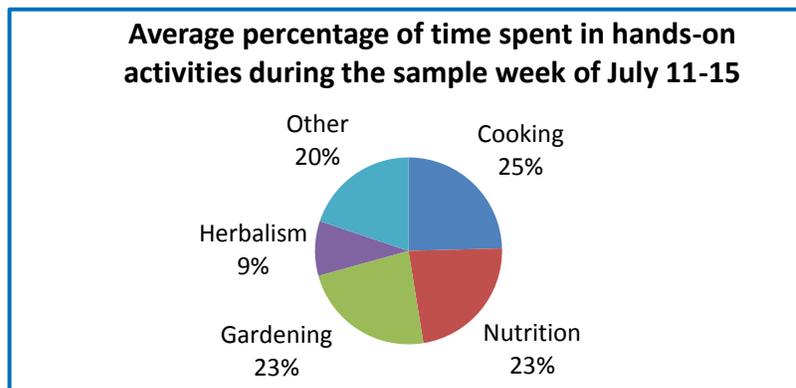
** The sample week was selected out of 10 weeks when programs were in session*

Assessment and Evaluation

Weekly program reports, Site Coordinator final evaluations, and parent surveys provide us with important feedback to assess the impact of the Gardens for Learning grant program. We need to know how many children are benefiting from summer activities, but more importantly, we are interested in documenting behavior and attitude changes in these youth participants.

- **Weekly records of time spent in gardens and kitchens showed...**

Quantitative data on attendance and hours spent on activities, as well as qualitative records on the week's highlights and challenges, is included in the weekly program reports that Site Coordinators submit during the length of their summer programs. For the GFL Statewide Coordinator, the analysis of the 53 Weekly Program Reports received by the end of the season provides a valuable summary of best practices, common challenges, ideas for incorporating into next year's program planning, and personal accounts of how the grant program is impacting youth.



Site Coordinators listed an impressive array of **creative recipes highlighting fresh garden harvest:**

- carrot muffins
- kale blueberry smoothies
- vegetable lasagna
- lettuce wraps with egg salad
- pesto for pizza
- zucchini noodles
- rainbow watermelon salsa
- Italian wedding soup
- build-your-own taco
- spinach strawberry salad



Children staffed a "Share Table" at the Richford NOTCH Playground and encouraged parents to take home extra garden harvest

In **34 out of 53** Weekly Program Reports, Site Coordinators describe **sending fresh harvest or prepared food home with youth participants**. Items included: slices of squash bread, bundles of culinary herbs, leftover pesto and garlic bread, a jar of strawberry jam, and of course freshly harvested vegetables!

A sample of weekly highlights:

“Going over the different bugs in the garden. Identifying bugs that are helpful and harmful to our garden.”

– Renee Hinton, Orange County Parent Child Center

“Comparing the different (plant) growth rates between two raised beds with old dirt and new compost. The kids noticed this on their own.” – Virginia Holiman, Highgate Public Library

“Staff who didn’t know what to do with squash having fun finding recipes and trying new things with the children.”

– Deidre Hodgson, Family Center of Washington County

A sample of weekly challenges:

“Having low numbers made it a challenge to do some of the group activities I had planned.” – Beth Ridley, St Johnsbury School

“Trying to keep the toddlers from picking all of the tomatoes and peppers before they are ready. They were so excited to see them and wanted to pick them all. We need to do smaller groups in the garden when we have toddlers down there.”

– Deidre Hodgson, Family Center of Washington County

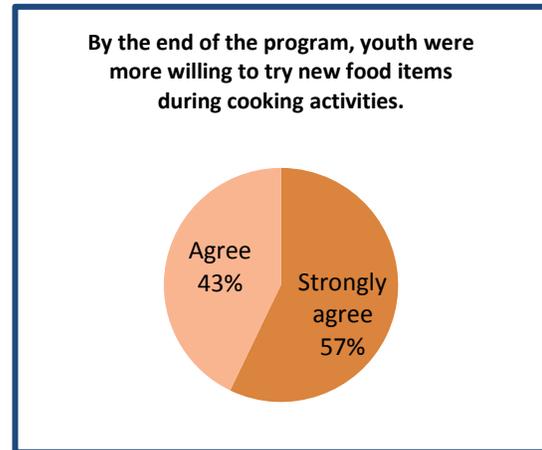
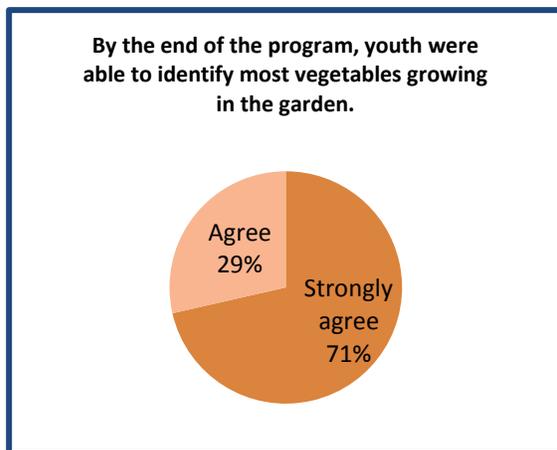
“Getting all of the kids on board with eating the stuffed bell peppers was a little tricky – but for the most part at least they TRIED it.” – Alanna Ojibway, Upper Valley Haven



A toddler learns when, and how, to harvest a ripe cucumber at the Family Center of Washington County

- **Site Coordinators reflect on children’s behavior changes...**

Site Coordinator’s leadership role as childcare providers, educators, and garden managers provides valuable feedback on the participants and program impacts. Site Coordinators are required to fill out an end-of-season survey that includes rating scales and short response questions.



We asked Site Coordinators to share an anecdote that illustrates the **positive impact the summer programs have on the lives of youth participants**. The influence that gardening has on a child's willingness to try new foods is illustrated in Renee Hinton's anecdote about a young boy at the Orange County Parent Child Center:

“Cooper does not care to try new foods. Throughout this experience, he has helped to plant, water, weed, and take care of the plants in the garden. After planting, taking care of, picking, and cooking the zucchini, he decided he did not want to try it. He does not try new foods very often. He did agree to try the zucchini after being reminded of how much he did to grow and prepare it. He didn't care for it, but we considered the experience a success because he put it in his mouth, chewed it, and swallowed it, instead of just licking a piece and spitting it out.”

- **Parents also notice healthy eating habits...**

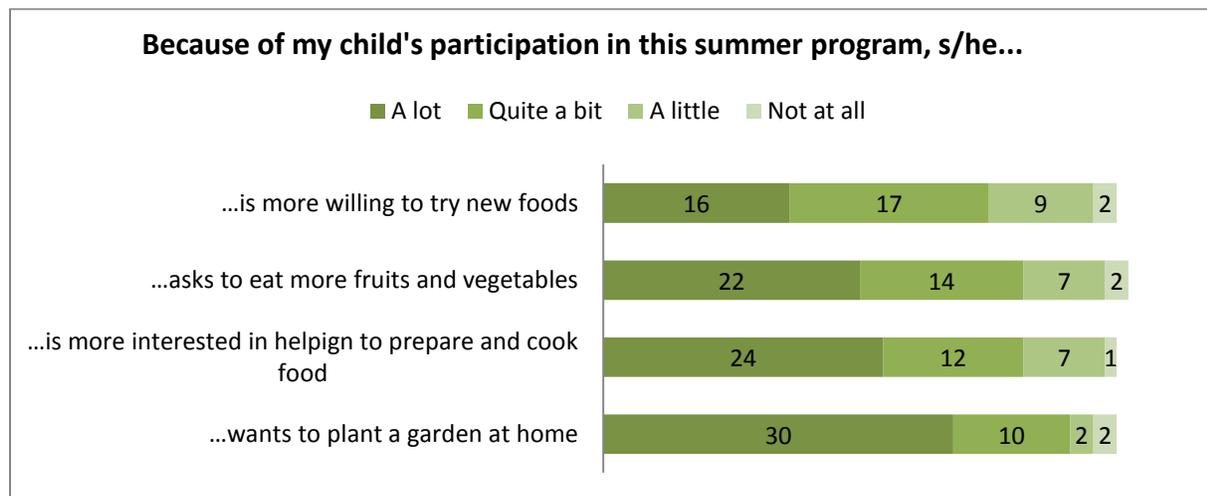
An overall evaluation of the 44 Parent Surveys received shows that participating children develop a strong positive attitude towards trying new foods, eating fruits and vegetables, and interest in continuing activities at home.

“My child has always been outgoing and friendly but has not always had the best palette when it comes to eating fruits and veggies. She now specifically asks for certain fruits and veggies and is knowledgeable about why it is important to incorporate these foods into our daily routine... I am grateful for programs like this that she would otherwise not be able to be part of.”

– Mother of a young girl at Upper Valley Haven



Mother visiting her son during an activity morning at the Highgate Public Library



Program Implementation

Grant Award Package

Gardens for Learning program sites received a grant award package to help cover program costs and provide ongoing support from the Statewide Coordinator. In 2016, nine Gardens for Learning sites received:

- A grant check to be used for program materials and/or salary stipends
- A resource box valued at \$100 with child-friendly gardening and cooking supplies
- A \$150 gift certificate to Gardener’s Supply
- A year-long VCGN membership including discounts for garden leadership workshops
- Travel stipends for Site Coordinators to attend the Spring and Fall Retreats in Barre
- Two site visits to provide technical support
- Bimonthly emails full of resources and tips for gardening and cooking with children

“We had a lot of fun testing out the vegetable noodle-maker. We made some yummy zucchini noodles!”
– Alanna Ojibway, Site Coordinator at the Upper Valley Haven

Spring and Fall Retreats for Site Coordinators

The Spring Retreat offers Site Coordinators a networking opportunity to meet, share resources, learn new skills, and clarify grant reporting requirements. It is a particularly relevant gathering for new Site Coordinators who need guidance and inspiration for planning their summer programs. Through group discussions, hands-on activity demonstrations, and brainstorming sessions, attendees share their past experiences and new ideas for engaging children in gardens and kitchens. The Fall Retreat in September is an opportunity for Site Coordinators to individually assess their summer programs and for VCGN to assess the collective impact, needs, and next steps for the Gardens for Learning grant program.



Site Coordinators receive Gardens for Learning signs to place at their garden sites

Site Visits

These site visits provide ongoing support for Site Coordinators and inform VCGN’s assessment of each program. The GFL Statewide Coordinator scheduled a first round of site visits in May and June to meet with the four new sites joining the grant program this year. Two of those sites – Orange County Parent Child Center and Highgate Public Library – were creating new gardens and required technical assistance to guide their garden design and management decisions. The second round of site visits in July and August were an opportunity to witness programming in action, meet the youth participants, and have a sense of what Site Coordinators are offering children. During site visits, Carolina is able to personally assess how each site is incorporating educational standards in hands-on gardening, nutrition, and cooking.

Boys and Girls Club of Rutland

Gardens for Learning site since: 2016

Program length and enrollment: 5 weeks – Children enroll in the full summer program

Average number of children participating per week: 6

Site Coordinator: Christine Gatti-Palance

Highlight: Working with a small group allowed all children to easily be involved in food preparation, everyone sat down around a long table for meals, and there was frequently leftover food for children to take home. Christine reported the most significant behavior change as *“Children eat(ing) family style and learn(ing) to use table manners.”*

Lesson Learned: Youth ran experimental designs to engineer ways for rainwater to be dispersed off of a roof and away from their garden containers. Youth learned about soil erosion and identified the most resilient culinary herb (mint!) through practical, hands-on problem solving in the garden.

Spotlight on hands-on cooking: Weekly cooking activities followed a theme of *traveling around the world through food*. During their trip to Italy, children harvested oregano, basil, and thyme to prepare a tomato sauce from scratch for a meatball and spaghetti lunch. Furthermore, Christine noticed that the subsidized meals provided for children attending programming at the Boys and Girls Club are high in refined flours and sugar. Thus, she consciously added in more nutrient dense protein sources such as cottage cheese and yogurt for children to use in creating their own recipes for dips and spreads.



Making signs to label garden plants



Youth learned about seeds of all shapes and sizes while creating recycled art projects

“The dip with the cottage cheese and peppers and garlic and oregano was great! I made it with Nana and took it to my aunt’s house. She said it was the best ever!”

– Adriana, 8 years old

Family Center of Washington County

Gardens for Learning site since: 2012

Program length and enrollment: 5 weeks – Different children participate in daily activities

Average number of children participating per week: 50

Site Coordinator: Deidre Hodgson



A new shade cloth provides much needed protection from the sun in this garden classroom for young children

Highlight: Each summer week followed an inquiry-based theme to invite children to notice changes in the garden and gain confidence through joy-filled learning. In mid-summer, when weeds were overrunning the garden, Deidre introduced the theme *How strong are you for weed pulling?* and reported children being very proud of their accomplishments in caring for the garden.



The joy of eating a freshly harvested carrot

**“Look at this one - I got all the plant and the root!
I am so strong!”** – Levi, 4 years old

Lesson Learned: Deidre used the Gardener’s Supply gift card to purchase a triangular shade cloth for providing much-needed protection from midday sun. The little bit of shade invited children and their caregivers to spend longer visits in the garden and even participate in simple cooking activities directly in the garden.

Spotlight on hands-on nutrition: Children are gently encouraged to snack in the garden and become acquainted with the taste of raw vegetables. They dip the vegetables in a bucket of clean water and rarely hesitate to take small bites of favorite vegetables such as carrots, green beans, and cherry tomatoes.

Green Acres Apartments

Gardens for Learning site since: 2009

Program length and enrollment: 8 weeks – Children enroll in weekly activities

Average number of children participating per week: 11

Site Coordinator: Joann Darling



Calendula is featured as the plant of the week - an edible and medicinal flower!

Highlight: By introducing a “Plant of the week,” children focused their attention on specific plants that were growing in their neighborhood’s community garden. Many of the selected plants have medicinal uses and thus deepened children’s experience with food as medicine. Children frequently harvested plantain to make a poultice to soothe insect bites, they picked stevia leaves to naturally sweeten lemonade, and they knew exactly where to find mint to prepare a digestive tea.

Lesson Learned: Summer activities invite neighborhood children to become involved with the food justice work that Good Food, Good Medicine primarily coordinates for adult residents at Green Acres. Gaining valuable kitchen and gardening skills nurture children’s sense of place, confidence, and responsibility. As Joann expresses, *“I think they come away feeling that they are part of something special in their neighborhood.”* For next year, Joann is exploring the possibility of organizing a summer camp for 3- and 4-year olds who were very enthusiastic about joining in on activities with their older siblings.

Spotlight on hands-on cooking: A generous assortment of kid-friendly cooking tools such as plastic serrated knives, small box graters, and flexible cutting boards facilitated children of all ages and abilities to participate in food preparation. Cutting and chopping vegetables became routine activities for children as they prepared rainbow salsa, carrot salad, kale chips, and other garden-inspired snacks. At the end of cooking activities, Joanne packed up samples of prepared food for children to take home and share with their families.



Can you guess which vegetable gave this dip its beautiful color?

“I need to learn how to wash dishes if I am going to be a chef when I grow up.”

– Sophia, 8 years old

Highgate Apartments

Gardens for Learning site since: 2005

Program length and enrollment: 8 weeks – Children enroll in weekly activities

Average number of children participating per week: 9

Site Coordinator: Joann Darling



Reading a story while snacking on fresh salsa, corn chips, and watermelon

Highlight: The Highgate Community Garden continues to be an exemplary outdoor classroom and gathering space for hosting a Gardens for Learning summer program. A canopy tent provides shade for storytelling in the garden, food waste from snacks goes directly into the compost tumbler, perennial plants provide pollinator habitat for children to learn about butterflies, and signs identify the culinary and medicinal uses of plants in community beds. On the last day of summer camp, children decorated the garden to welcome their friends and families for a celebratory garden tea party.

Lesson Learned: Joann reported that searching for insects and worms left children with a memorable impression. Children made butterfly feeders to hang on the branches of an elderberry tree in the pollinator garden and relocated worms into the compost bin to speed up the decomposition process. Understanding the ecological value of insects and their importance for growing food is one of the educational standards of the Gardens for Learning program.

“Can I have more salsa to take home to my Mom?”

– Cierra, 11 years old

Spotlight on hands-on gardening:

Throughout the summer, children learned to identify plants by using all of their senses – looking at leaf patterns, noticing textures, taste testing in small quantities, and gently rubbing leaves to release aromatic oils. Children displayed confidence in their gardening knowledge and readily took up the challenge to participate in a “smelling scavenger hunt” to identify aromatic herbs.

“I didn’t know corn chips were blue!”

– Christian, 9 years old



Proud of her basket full of Red Russian kale

Highgate Public Library

Gardens for Learning site since: 2016

Program length and enrollment: 5 weeks – Children enroll in weekly activities

Average number of children participating per week: 17

Site Coordinators: Virginia Holiman and Leah Britch



Lunchtime in the library with parents joining their children

Highlight: The Gardens for Learning grant program immensely contributed to a new initiative at the library by providing financial resources and engaging the local community in the development of the new garden space. Local businesses donated materials such as cedar boards and topsoil, parents accompanied their children on activity days to lend an extra hand when weeds got out of control, and children quickly developed a sense of belonging towards the new garden.

“I come when you are not here to check up on the garden.” – Anthony, 9 years old

Lesson Learned: The rush to set up the new garden in early summer and schedule Gardens for Learning activity mornings were significant challenges for Site Coordinators. Lessons learned related to garden planting calendars and program planning are relevant for all Gardens for Learning sites:

- 1) Advanced garden planning is essential for ensuring that children can participate in planting, tending, and harvesting vegetables during the summer. Technical assistance provided by the GFL Statewide Coordinator is a valuable resource to make sure this happens.
- 2) Scheduling summer camp activities during consecutive weeks allows for more continuity and cohesion among youth participants.



Medicinal herbs to make healing teas and salves

Spotlight on hands-on nutrition: Virginia recalls her approach to encourage children to try new foods: “‘Try it three times’ worked to get kids to taste.” During the mid-summer site visit, children prepared an enormous green salad with a mix of lettuces, cucumbers, and tomatoes from the garden. Witnessing young children asking for second and third servings of raw vegetable salad is a strong testament to the program’s impact on instilling healthy food habits.

Orange County Parent Child Center

Gardens for Learning site since: 2016

Program length and enrollment: 4 weeks – Children enroll in the full summer program

Average number of children participating per week: 13

Site Coordinator: Renee Hinton



The newly established garden with sunflowers growing

Highlight: In addition to the Gardens for Learning grant, the Orange County Parent Child Center also received a Green Thumbs at Work grant administered by the Vermont Community Garden Network. These funds resulted in the establishment of a new community garden that will benefit administrative staff, early childhood teachers, kitchen staff, young children and their parents. Vegetables harvested from the kitchen plots were incorporated into daily menus, preschool children prepared salsa, and families were able to take home extra produce.

Lesson Learned: Managing a newly established garden and coordinating the summer program after an unexpected staff turnover were significant challenges at this program site. Renee reported that promoting the Gardens for Learning program to families was difficult because many parents did not know what was going on. She worked through this challenge by offering parents fresh produce that their children had grown in the garden. Another challenge was having a limited harvest because the garden was planted so late in the season. However, figuring out what recipes to follow with available garden harvest eventually became a highlight.

Spotlight on hands-on gardening: Although Renee knew little about gardening, her inquiry-based teaching approach allowed her to learn alongside children. For example, the appearance of a mysterious caterpillar munching on tomato plants invited a whole unit of exploration on insects and garden pests. The culprit was eventually identified as a tomato hornworm and inspired the children’s curiosity and compassion:

**“These hornworms are so soft!
Can we keep them as class pets?”**
– Joselyn, 5 years old



A preschooler learns how to slice a summer squash

Richford Health Center

Gardens for Learning site since: 2005

Program length and enrollment: 6 weeks – Different children participate in daily activities

Average number of children participating per week: 25

Site Coordinator: Melissa Gibson

Highlight: Gardening and cooking activities are offered as electives for summer campers at Richford’s NOTCH Playground summer camp. Lianne Trombley, the Camp Director, reported that “*children chose to be in the garden program, where as in prior years we had to encourage children to participate.*” Much of this success was due to Melissa’s enthusiasm and skill as an educator to engage children of various ages. Children were thrilled to participate in daily garden challenges such as identifying a vegetable cooked into a cobbler dessert (zucchini!) and reciting vegetables in alphabetical order.



Children gathered around the outdoor kitchen station, ready to snack on Carrot No-Bake Energy Balls



Older sister teaching her younger sister food prep skills

Lesson Learned: Since summer camp takes place in a public park, this program site faces the trial of having limited infrastructure for cooking activities. The temporary cooking station that was built for this summer was an incredibly valuable asset to the program – it even included an extension cord for powering a food processor! However, Melissa was only able to follow recipes for preparing raw vegetables because they had no access to a stove. On the top of their list for next year is purchasing a two-burner camp stove with grant funding.

Spotlight on hands-on nutrition: Children participated in activities that challenged their perception of healthy food. One of Melissa’s educational goals was to show children that the vegetables they harvest can taste better than a prepackaged product. For example, children were hesitant to try the Carrot No-Bake Energy Bars, but later rated them as their favorite snacks from summer camp.

“This is better than junk food and I don’t know why.”

– Vanessa, 10 years old

St Johnsbury School

Gardens for Learning site since: 2007

Program length and enrollment: 5 weeks – Different children participate in daily activities

Average number of children participating per week: 10

Site Coordinator: Bethany Ridley



Using a crinkle cutter to slice bananas for the kale smoothie

Highlight: Since Gardens for Learning programming takes place during summer months, fun activities must complement the educational standards in gardening, nutrition, and cooking. At the St Johnsbury School, playful games were incorporated into weekly activities and offered an important balance between structured learning and free play. Children participated in weeding challenges and watering relays, played Botany in a Bag guessing games, and explored My Plate guidelines with food models. Everyone also enjoyed a field trip to a garden labyrinth and building fairy houses in the garden.

“Those were the best smoothies ever, even with the kale!”

– Cody, 7 years old

Lesson Learned: Youth participation posed several challenges for Beth as the Site Coordinator. New summer camp activity scheduling meant that the same children would not show up each day and/or lower than expected attendance meant that Beth had to rethink her activities to best suit the group she worked with each day. A few children who participated in garden camp had some challenging behaviors. However, Beth reported that these children in particular showed great response in the garden and believes that experiential learning was the key to their successful integration.

Spotlight on hands-on cooking: Several items included in the Gardens for Learning supply box were featured during cooking activities. The vegetable spiralizer was easy for children to use and the resulting zucchini noodles with marinara sauce turned into a much-loved recipe. The collection of flexible cutting boards came in handy when each child was responsible for chopping a fruit to add into a smoothie. Children also prepared lettuce wraps, egg salad with dill from the garden, and learned how to turn heavy cream into butter.



Exploring flower botany in the garden

Upper Valley Haven

Gardens for Learning site since: 2016

Program length and enrollment: 6 weeks – Children enroll in the full summer program

Average number of children participating per week: 13

Site Coordinator: Alanna Ojibway



A raw vegetable snack and lesson on plant parts

Highlight: Site Coordinators are encouraged to design their programming around weekly themes to help structure activities in the garden and kitchen. Weekly themes at the Upper Valley Haven accurately reflected Gardens for Learning educational standards in hands-on gardening, nutrition, and cooking.

During “plant parts and tomato week,” children were excited to dig up plants to learn about what different roots look like and participate in a blind taste test with five varieties of tomatoes. During “squash and pollinator week,” the group made zucchini noodles with the vegetable spiralizer and children taste tested honey after learning about bees and the process of making honey.

Lesson Learned: Weekly taste tests challenged children to try new foods and change their perception on certain food items. Alanna reflects on significant behavior changes she observed:

“I absolutely loved seeing the kids make the homemade pesto and see the transition from initially making it and getting lots of ‘Ew, it smells gross!’ to providing samples to adults and getting SO much positive feedback. They all really were just beaming with pride.”

This experience affirms research-based practice to invite adults to participate in taste tests to model trying new foods and encourage children to participate in the taste test.



Children on a field trip to a local farm

Spotlight on hands-on cooking: Children were thrilled to participate in weekly “Garden Chef” activities where they were give a plant from the garden and then challenged to make sample-size snacks to distribute to staff. Cooking for an audience proved to be a great way to involve children in teamwork, build their self-confidence in cooking skills, and engage the wider community of adults at the Upper Valley Haven.

Looking Ahead to 2017

As we look towards our fourth year of running the Gardens for Learning grant program, we anticipate continuing to support returning sites and also welcoming new sites to join the program for the first time. Our assessment of the experiences of the 13 sites that have participated in Gardens for Learning between 2014 and 2016 has allowed us to identify key strategies for success. Sites with the following characteristics have high success rates with youth participation, community engagement, garden maintenance, and longer-term sustainability:

- **Target youth participants to a specific age range.** In 2017, we will be strongly encouraging program sites to open summer camp enrollment for specific age ranges, i.e. 3-6 year olds or 7-10 year olds or 11-14 year olds.



Two 5 year old boys attentively observe a garden worm wiggling across a napkin

Several Site Coordinators report feeling challenged by children's different skill levels, interests, caregiving needs, and attention spans when their programs enroll a wide range of ages. Alanna Ojibway, Site Coordinator at the Upper Valley Haven, reflects on her experience: *"Our summer program is offered to a wide range of children and because of that it was difficult at times to plan lessons that would be appropriate and engaging for all of them."* Joann Darling, Site Coordinator at Green Acres and Highgate Apartments, mentioned that for next year she is considering designing a second summer program specifically for 4- and 5-year olds who were eager to participate this year even though activities were not always age appropriate.

- **Involve at least two adults to run the summer program.** We recognize Site Coordinators' multi-faceted leadership role and thus, recommend a team effort approach towards running a Gardens for Learning summer program.
Some sites hire a program assistant; other sites are supported by parent volunteers or Master Gardeners. As a further example, the Richford Health Center hires teenagers to help out as camp counselors and assist with rounding up children to begin a gardening activity on time or cleaning up after a cooking activity. Sites with a strong support staff commonly have more productive gardens, they have a larger capacity to enroll more children, and grant reporting is typically submitted in a timelier fashion.
- **Early-season garden planning is necessary.** The GFL Statewide Coordinator will continue to support Site Coordinators with garden designs and technical assistance to succeed in growing a variety of vegetables and herbs for children to harvest and enjoy eating.
Sites benefit from having a committed staff or volunteer in charge of overseeing the garden throughout the season. The Boys and Girls Club of Rutland was faced with the challenge of having rainwater runoff ruin the vegetables planted in their container garden. Although Christine, the Site Coordinator, embraced the opportunity to teach a lesson on erosion, this meant that there weren't many vegetables for the children to harvest. Well-thought out garden designs and a defined planting calendar typically result in more abundant gardens and offer plenty opportunities for children to participate in hands-on gardening activities.

We look forward to welcoming the next generation of Gardens for Learning Site Coordinators and supporting summer programming for hundreds of children across Vermont!



Teamwork to use the salad spinner



A cheerful weeder!



Hands-on gardening lessons



Lettuce for weekly salad snacks



Many smiles during a lesson on identifying garden insects



The Gardens for Learning Supply Box awarded to each site