

Did You Know?

WRRC Volunteers Help Feed Families, Teach Gardening Basics



At a community garden on the grounds of the ARS Western Regional Research Center in Albany, CA, local students help prepare the soil and plant seeds.

With help from a handful of ARS volunteers, a small patch of earth at the Western Regional Research Center (WRRC) in Albany, CA, is serving a dual purpose: educating area schoolchildren about where their food comes from and providing food to those in need.

The volunteers spend an hour or two each week weeding, planting, and harvesting vegetables, legumes, squashes, and cover crops at the WRRC community garden. It is part of an effort that began 4 years ago to raise both food and awareness about the important connection between our food supply and the soil that we need to produce it, says Rebecca Haussmann, who helps coordinate the ARS volunteers and school visits to the garden.

“The school groups, and even our ARS employees, are seeing firsthand how food is connected to the land and how the land is connected to the food,” says Haussmann, who is manager of the Plant Gene Expression Center, co-located with the WRRC in Albany.

Produce from the garden on Buchanan Street is donated to City Ministries, which operates a food bank that serves the Albany area. The most serious threats to bountiful yields are squirrels and geese, but the garden has become a dependable source of produce for the food bank. About 2,000 pounds of food are donated to it every year.

The garden usually plays host to children from nearby Ocean View Elementary School a few times each year. Children who tour this 80-by-120 foot patch see and hold different varieties of seeds and seedlings, hear how those plants grow, and do most of the planting.

They will come back months later either to harvest what they planted or to pick the fruits of another group’s labors.

Their visits are scheduled to ensure an adequate number of adult supervisors, often a mix of parents and ARS volunteers. Harvests are sometimes delayed a week or two so that kids coming for tours will have something to pick. As a rule, every child visiting the garden goes home with vegetables of some sort.

The garden offers an assortment of crops, including corn, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, pumpkins, lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, kohlrabi, artichoke, garlic, onions, fennel, carrots, squashes, and beets. Vetch, barley, and fava beans are planted as cover crops in the fall.

As you might expect, the site is a routine stop for ARS employees participating in the WRRC’s annual “Take Your Child to Work” day. “It’s become a very popular spot,” Haussmann says.—By **Dennis O’Brien**, ARS Information Staff. See [Photo Corner](#) for more.

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