

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Indoor container garden promotes youth engagement and wellness in schools

AT A GLANCE

Indoor container garden program brings gardens into the classroom, providing students with a hands-on learning environment about growing food and healthy eating during the school year.

The Situation

Diets high in fruits and vegetables have been associated with improved human health and reduced the risk of many diseases. Yet, most youth do not consume the recommended amount. In Idaho, 37.4% of adolescents reported eating vegetables less than one time per day. Studies have shown that school gardens offer an experiential learning approach to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, encourage the development of healthy eating habits and improve mental wellbeing among youth. While school gardens offer many health benefits to youth, it is challenging to involve students in the gardening process as the growing season occurs during summer break when schools are not in session.

Our Response

The Indoor Container Garden program — SEED (Science, Education, Environment, Dietary) is designed to bring gardens into the classroom, providing students with an experiential, hands-on learning environment about the process of growing foods. Through gardening activities and nutrition education classes, students learn about the science of growing food and increase knowledge on healthy eating. They also have the opportunity to try new foods and understand where food



A master gardener showed students where to plant the seeds. Photo by Susan Ettesvold, Eat Smart Idaho.

comes from. The objectives of the program were to: a) engage students in gardening and teach them the science of growing their own food; b) increase knowledge on healthy eating and promote healthy behaviors; c) improve fruit and vegetable consumption and a greater willingness to try new foods; d) create awareness of and appreciation for the environment; d) build self-confidence and reduce mental stress.

Program collaborators included Extension educators in family and consumer sciences, 4-H and horticulture, as well as Eat Smart Idaho, master gardeners, school principals, teachers and the school district child nutrition directors. The target audience was students from kindergartens through fifth grades at schools that had 50% or more free and reduced lunch participants.

Teachers who expressed interest in participating in the program were provided with the materials needed to establish an indoor container garden. We helped teachers and students set up their garden. Students involved in the seed planting chose to grow either a salad garden (such as mixed greens, kale mix, baby bok choy) or an herb garden (such as basil, oregano, thyme, cilantro, parsley). We also taught them what plants need to grow, how to check water moisture and what plant parts we eat. For the next few months, students worked with their teacher to water and care for their garden. An Eat Smart Idaho's SNAP-Ed nutrition instructor offered nutrition education lessons. Students also learned how to harvest their gardens and dry herbs in paper bags. When the garden was ready to harvest, students had the opportunity to try the food they grew, such as yogurt ranch dip seasoned with fresh herbs, fresh salsa or egg muffins baked with mixed greens.

Program Outcomes

From 2022 through 2024, the program has been implemented in 70 classrooms at four schools, reaching 1,426 students from kindergarten through fifth grade. About 670 students (93%) tried the vegetables and herbs they grew, with 82% indicated that they liked them. Students could also identify at least one factor that plants need to grow.

Results from the teacher's program feedback showed that 100% were satisfied with the program. All teachers (100%) would recommend the program to a colleague, and 50% of them learned about the University of Idaho Extension because of the program.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Testimonials showed a strong impact on youth involvement and learning experience through the program. The responses from teachers included:

- “We used them in recipes or smelling them. I also used them to teach about the plant cycle. They enjoyed seeing everything grow.”
- “We use them as part of our science curriculum, watching them grow, letting students see the seeds, what they need and how fast they grow. My students both last year and this year have had so much fun... This is a phenomenal program in our school and it has helped build so much for these kids that they don't get to do or see at home.”
- “My students love taking care of the garden. Watering the garden is a special privilege. I've also heard great feedback from parents and my students about the herb growing kit we sent home.”

The Future

The program has grown from a single county program to other parts of the state. It has been replicated beyond the school settings, including childcare centers and after-school programs. The program has been included in the Eat Smart Idaho's SNAP-Ed plan as a policy, systems and environmental project, with the plan to expand the reach and enhance learning experience to promote healthy schools and communities.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

The project was funded by the City of Twin Falls through Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (SNAP-Ed), Chobani, Moss Greenhouses and Webb Nursery.