

Sow There! What You'll Learn in A Garden Built for Kids



Garden helpers extraordinaire Ernie Dalton and Mark Koch show off a bucket filled with Indian peach pits.
Photo by Heather Hacking

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Last week I cashed in on an invite to visit Nord Country School and Ernie Dalton's school garden. It's not technically his garden, of course, in the same way that any patch of earth is never really our own, only borrowed. It's what we do with that patch today and tomorrow that makes it our own, for a moment. Ernie has had many moments over the past 17 years. That's how long he's been leaving his fingerprints in the soil at the school, which is close to his home. A few years ago, Mark Koch came alongside. Now the two work elbow-to-elbow, when they're not bumping elbows with the children at the school.

Mark and Ernie led me slowly through the neatly-tended garden beds and moderately mature fruit trees. We had only scratched the surface when children arrived to make footprints along the path. They were quick to check how much the radishes had grown since the last visit, which was a lot. Or how much the carrots had grown — not much. The flowers on the fruit tree had faded, and children were shown the tiniest of fruit that would grow by the next time they gathered under the trees. On this day, kids plopped cucumber seeds onto freshly-turned soil, which are likely sprouted by now after a good rain.

The compact orchard has been filled with kid-friendly trees. It all started with cherries, Ernie said with a bit of pride and a note of nostalgia. The first tree is just a stump now, left as a memorial to the garden's beginnings. Kids love growing things they can nibble right then, and again later, including cherries, grape, raspberries, peaches.



Recently flowers and now young fruit, food grows at Nord Country School's garden.
Photo by Heather Hacking

A favorite includes Indian Peaches. You won't find these in stores, Ernie explained, because they're not the kind of peaches you can toss into the back of a truck and expect to arrive in good condition at your big-box store. The beauty of the Indian peaches, especially for the Nord School kiddoes, is that the pits can be planted. For most fruit trees, if you plant a seed or pit, the fruit on the tree may look nothing like the mother plant. But Indian Peaches stay true to their roots.

As proof of how well the fruit is devoured, Ernie showed me a bucket of pits. Nearby was a row of young Indian Peach trees, which was what remained after children brought trees home.

As I admired the hard work of Mark and Ernie, and watched the kids come and go, I thought how fortunate for the teachers at this school. Through the inspiration of their garden keepers, students could graph the growth of peach trees, learn about plant life cycles, hunt for bugs, and learn the difference between a vegetable and fruits we often mistake for vegetables.

Then, along came Hudson Wesner, a tall boy for the second grade, who was no newcomer to the shovels and spades. Many children volunteer in the garden during recess. Ernie calls it "kid power," which keeps him from bending endlessly to pull weeds. "Hudson is the No. 1 worker," the men with grubby fingernails said.

This is Hudson's third year as a garden worker, and he's learned "never to step on flowers," the boy said during a quick Q&A before he returned to class. Gophers, he said, will eat all your hard work and you need to know which plants are weeds and which are the plants you want to let grow.

Hudson will be moving soon, but Ernie and Mark know that they shared something very special with the child and watched something grow in him from kindergarten through most of the second grade.

As I think about the value of a school garden, I realize that what children learn and what grows there is entirely dependent upon the amount of time dedicated by people like Mark and Ernie and others.