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Kathy Dozier, tells us that they plan to sell the produce and donate the proceeds to the Warren BackPack program, a local charity that provides food for children in need.

Most recently, Gocio Elementary, a Title One school in north Sarasota, broke ground on their school garden in November 2009 with the help of a generous donation from Home Depot. Gocio teacher and the garden coordinator John Freeman explains that they want the students to learn that when they put hard work into something, whatever it may be, the benefits are sweeping.

John has collaborated with the University Parkway store of Home Depot to make the Gocio garden a reality. Through Team Depot, a program in which members of a Home Depot district team up on a community project, the store has donated a gated fence, an irrigation drip system, tools, soil, and vegetable and herb plants. Home Depot's Mark Campbell, in addition to Dale Martin, Dan Meier, and Travis Sterling, have been hands-on participants in the Gocio garden's cultivation, with the support of district manager Bernardez Santiago, store manager Ron Johnson, and assistant store manager Chris Dralus.

Mark's own upbringing in rural Rhode Island, experiences as a substitute teacher, and current studies toward a master's in special education make him a unique and valuable asset to the project. He is a strong believer in giving what one can to his community. Among his efforts with Home Depot are: workshops for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder at Fruitville Elementary, a project for the North Sarasota Library, and of course their work at Gocio Elementary.

Gocio's plans for their 3,000-square-foot garden include being able to provide a healthy snack for the students within a year and teaching the children about recycling and "using things to their utmost capability," remarks John. Although the preparations for planting have taken longer than expected—the soil feels more like rock as the children and their advisers dig and sweat away—the participants are not discouraged. The eagerness of the students to get to work in the garden, and their enthusiasm to fight through the



obstacles, illustrates how they relish this time, both to be outdoors as well as to be key contributors of something significant.

When they have accomplished their challenging tasks of excavating, planting, and harvesting, the Gocio students will give back a percentage of what they grow to a local food bank. Further possible applications of the garden range from creating a compost pile to learning how to prepare and cook the vegetables. John observes, "Unless you've had a tomato or a carrot out of a garden, you really don't know what that's supposed to taste like." The Gocio Elementary garden will allow the students to experience for possibly the first time the true fresh flavor of fruits and vegetables.

These inspirational efforts of the many schools in our area, countless gardens across the country, and individuals and companies who support them are paving the way for children to learn social tools and practical skills that reach far beyond the classroom... and the gardens' soil. We know that the advantages are significant and well researched, and thanks to the steps many communities are taking, school gardens are on their way to becoming accepted components of educational curriculum.

## EDIBLE SOUPSTONE

### FRESH CARROTS & DIRTY FINGERNAILS

#### *School Gardening, an Innovative Tool for Learning and Collaboration*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ELLIE CAMPBELL

Imagine a vision as follows: Children are under the warm sun, getting their little fingernails gritty with soil as their minds fill with knowledge of science and math. Together these young ones share the all-important task of nurturing seedlings and watching as their hard work turns into fresh-as-can-be produce to nourish their growing bodies. What was otherwise a patch of dirt is now an active ground for learning, collaboration... and fun.

This scene is a reality in many communities across the country in the form of school gardens. While it may seem like a modern concept to most of us, the school garden movement came to the United States in the 1890s. The California School Garden Network (CSGN) explains: "Gardens sprang up at schools all over the country during the early 20th century. [...] Then, the environmental movement of the 1970s renewed educators' interest. More recently, the popularity of school gardens as an educational tool has steadily grown as a way to teach healthy eating behaviors and to incorporate and increase hands-on learning experiences in interdisciplinary lessons." Even when the movement began, the benefits were seen as expansive and valuable. Some advocates believed that the gardens were a way to beautify schools and urban environments, some focused on how they would enhance dietary and health practices, and others found value in using them to develop students' sense of responsibility and morality (University of California Department

of Agriculture and Natural Resources). And of course, a clear advantage to having a school garden is the educational value.

Being part of such an activity allows students to delve into a variety of disciplines, all while enjoying each other's company and the outdoors. Though science is the most obvious field of study represented in a garden's development—as children learn about ecosystems, insects, etc.—others include the arts, social science, and math. For example, the CSGN notes that "students find taking daily measurements of garden bean plants and then charting the growth rate to determine the fastest-growing plant in the garden much more exciting than charting numbers provided by a textbook." Taking the lesson outside the walls of classroom and into practical experiences engages the students in a way that chalkboard lectures and textbooks cannot. Students who are part of a school garden also enjoy the healthy experience of fresh air and hands-on work, peer and community collaboration, knowledge of nutrition, and the environmental consciousness and social awareness that stem from being responsible caretakers for the garden's growth.

Several local schools are picking up on this and taking action. Sarasota's Booker Middle School is currently involved in a garden project, as are North Port's Toledo Blade Elementary and Island Village Montessori in Venice. The Out-of-Door Academy's middle school has created a garden at the upper school campus. Their dean,

