



The Gardening Program at the Waldorf School of Princeton

Throughout its history, the Waldorf School of Princeton has offered a unique and structured gardening program. Working in the garden is part of an integrated curriculum of practical and fine arts, sciences, languages, mathematics, and athletics. This curriculum helps students to build a coherent understanding of the world that is grounded in an understanding of the human being's unique position in nature. Using the school garden and greenhouse as their classroom, students experience the disappearance of the usual physical boundaries of the school building, and immerse their hands and energy in helping to create a healthy, sustainable biodynamic garden.

Beginning in the nursery and continuing into kindergarten, children are planting seeds and bulbs and caring for a garden, experiencing the joy of a harvest such as strawberries or sweet peas. The first and second grade students plant, sow, and transplant in the school's biodynamic garden. In third grade, a formal gardening class begins. Students in third, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades each have a gardening class one day a week for an hour and a half each day. Children in all grades interact with our garden through festivals, summer camp activities, and outdoor play.

In the third grade, the gardening curriculum closely supports the main lessons taught by the class teacher. Elements of the curriculum include measuring the garden and ploughing the earth with an antique plough; learning how to use hand tools to turn over the soil, weed, and plant; cutting down the broomcorn they planted as second graders and making brooms with a professional broom maker; preparing worm bins and seed mixes for the birds; cleaning and oiling tools; cutting signs and stakes; gathering maple sap for syrup; and planting garden beds using hand tools.

In fifth grade, students again use hand tools to weed, double-dig, and create raised beds. Many projects support elements of the main lesson curriculum, such as botany and ancient history (students create vertical gardens that resemble the Hanging Gardens of Babylon). Students begin to observe a mushroom log as well as the growth of bulbs and ferns in the greenhouse. They learn about edible and medicinal herbs, and explore uses for these herbs such as soapmaking, teas, and bath salts. Fifth graders create moss gardens and pinecone wreaths, and cook using the freshest harvest from the garden, which they eat together at the end of class. Each week two students are chosen to cook on a camp stove and create a meal.

In sixth grade, students harvest cool-weather crops such as herbs, corn, squash, beans, and pumpkins, later preparing salads and other meals from the garden's bounty, including pesto. Other activities include working together to lay stone pathways and borders; adopting a fruit tree (one tree per student) to tend throughout the year; sowing warm-weather crop seeds in the greenhouse and learning the art of transplanting seedlings; building tomato cages; and making a birdhouse. To support their exploration in the classroom of maps and roadways, students map the garden for crop rotation and plan beds.

Seventh graders study invasive and native species as they learn about the age of exploration. They learn about soil science, and how to build rain gardens, which help to conserve water and ease stormwater problems—a wonderful thing for New Jersey in particular, with its wetlands. In the eighth grade, students develop independent projects to improve the school campus, such as repairing the solar panels in the greenhouse or designing elements of the landscaping.

All of these lessons and adventures underscore our attachment to and dependence on the earth and the elements. The experiences of working cooperatively in the garden—whether preparing a seed bed, planting, cultivating, or harvesting—carry over to the arts, sciences, and, indeed, all of life.