



EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD

Gabi Whaley, 10, left, Brianna Holden, 9, center, and Graceanne Tarsa, 9, transplant Anise Hyssop herbs in the greenhouse at The Children's House Montessori school in Traverse City.

Record-Eagle/Garret Ellison

School: Teach children to grow food and they will eat forever

To say that Gabi Whaley's schoolyard is unique would be an understatement.

Not only does her class make a snack for the whole school every week, but the fourth graders planted, tended, harvested and prepared that food in their classroom, which boasts a kitchen, commons area, greenhouse and outside garden plots.

Funded by grant money, the experimental Della Terra program's edible garden class at The Children's House Montessori school in Traverse City combines gardening with cooking. The aim is to teach the art of growing fresh food as an alternative to processed, packaged and 99-cent fast fare.

The central tenet of the program is that fresh food grows healthy, smart kids. No surprises there. But the hurdle of getting those veggies into their diet has been solved by getting their hands in the dirt and invested in the method.

"If you put a radish on a kid's plate, they're not going to eat it," said instructor Cymbre Foster. "But if they pull it out of the ground, they will wash it off and try

it."

The program debuted in September 2006 for 66 students in grades one through six. Two semesters later, a train of students approached Foster holding \$1 bills. They wanted produce.

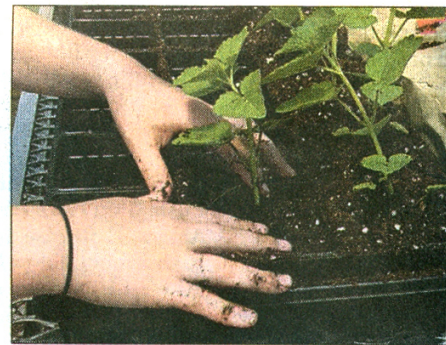
"We have a lot of kids who go to the grocery store now and ask their parents to buy leaf lettuce," she said, "not iceberg."

Lettuce was grown in the greenhouse over the winter. The 10-pound crop was harvested, bagged, tagged and sold for \$2 apiece to parents picking their kids up from school.

Foster said the increasing obesity epidemic was the springboard for the program. In her grant proposal she wrote, "A textbook cannot teach a child that requirements necessary to grow a plant — much like the developing person — are patience, gentleness, attentiveness, and respect; all character-building virtues."

The common classroom area adjoins a kitchen, where three fourth grade boys are chopping yellow peppers under the guidance of kitchen class instructor Trish Vandusen one recent day.

"The culmination of the week is to



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Gabi Whaley isn't afraid to get her hand dirty transplanting herbs.

prepare a school-wide snack on Friday afternoons," Vandusen said. That's food service for about 120 people. "It's something they definitely look forward to."

The waste from the kitchen is composted. Foster called Della Terra an attempt to create a model for other schools. The name means "of the Earth" in Italian.

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Gabi Whaley, 10, center, is busy in the greenhouse at The Children's House in Traverse City.

GARDEN

Students grow produce, learn to appreciate it

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The students have taken to it, to say the least.

"I'm excited to see the ginger and how that's turning out," said Whaley, a bright 10-year old in the class. With friends Graceanne Tarsa and Brianna Holden, both 9, she transplants Anise hyssop in the schoolyard

greenhouse.

"I'm going to start a garden with tomatoes so I can use what I learned," said Holden.

Tarsa said she's not a picky eater, but found her tastes for varieties has increased.

"I eat pretty much everything," she said. "But some things are really yummy, like the radishes."

The greenhouse sports rows of parsley, lemon balm, sage, lavender, four varieties of basil, black cherry tomatoes and more. The kids planted 90 percent of it using all organic growing practices — no pesticides or herbicides.

The plants require monitored watering, and the students work at their own pace in small groups of four to six at a time.

"Sometimes just one will come in wanting to water or transplant something," Foster said.

Foster maintains an online blog with periodic updates on the program at www.traversechildrenshouse.org/DellaTerra.asp. She would like to partner with the Taste The Local Difference product marketers and plans to sell some crops at the Grand Traverse Commons farmers market this summer.