



Learning and growing

At the Youth Garden Project, both kids and adults discover –and rediscover – the natural world

Written by Sharon Sullivan / Photos by Murice D. Miller

Eight-year old vegetarian Olive Reese doesn't much care for vegetables, unless they're picked fresh out of the garden. At the Youth Garden Project, where she's spending nine weeks in summer day camp, Olive has learned that freshly harvested vegetables taste much better than the store-bought variety. "She loves them from the garden," says her mother, Ali Reese. "It encourages her to eat healthier. She'll eat spinach in her quesadillas."

Caryn McGinty noticed her 7-year old daughter, Madeleine, came home from the Youth Garden Project's spring break camp one day smelling like onions. "She'd been eating chives from the garden and she loved them," McGinty recalls. At the Moab Farmers' Market, the family buys the Garden Project's fresh herbs. "Madeleine loves how the herbs make her hands smell after she's been carrying them around," says her mother. Like Olive, Madeleine discovered she also likes spinach fresh from the garden. "It's nice, because we haven't been able to have a garden — so this gives her exposure" to one, McGinty says.

Four years ago, Jennifer Jones' then-5-year old daughter "decided that kale was the best thing ever" once the kids picked, washed, salted and then baked it. The oven's heat transformed the vegetable's leaves into a crunchy snack resembling potato chips (but much healthier). "She's been eating kale ever since," Jones reports.

The "seed to table" concept is one that children experience routinely at the Youth Garden Project — and it routinely changes their perception of vegetables. "They get to eat snacks from the garden every day," says the nonprofit's new executive director, Ruth Linford. "Yesterday, we had chard wraps (chard and cream cheese wrapped in a tortilla). They walk by and see it growing. Then they go to snack time, and they're eating it." Chil-

dren are also free to graze the "nibble garden" where tomatoes and peppers flourish. In fact, anyone passing the "nibble garden" along the Mill Creek Pathway is welcome to stop and sample.

Kids who attend all nine weeks of Youth Garden Project summer camp watch different vegetables and fruits ripen over time, and then consume them. "It's really powerful," Linford says. "They get to see those changes in the garden." She suspects that most children, given the chance, would actually prefer a garden snack to an Oreo cookie. "Fresh snap peas taste like candy," but most kids simply don't have access to a real garden, she says.

The Youth Garden Project has been growing since 1996, when Moab resident Sarah Heffron founded it in order to offer youth with court-ordered community service an opportunity to use their hours learning how to nurture life by gardening (the Garden's mission is to "cultivate healthy children, families, and community through educational programs and the profound act of connecting people with food from seed to table").

Just a year after its inception, Heffron's brainchild received funding from AmeriCorps, the federal program that engages adults in public service with a goal of helping others, and began expanding its offerings to the larger community.



Youth Garden Project intern, Delaney Beals, tends to a vegetable garden.

Youth Garden Project Associate Director Kate Niederehe applies sunscreen to a young visitor in June.

By 2000, the Garden was, in essence, uprooted and replanted, having outgrown its original patch of land located in Heffron's backyard to its current location next door to Grand County High School, on two acres of school district property. "There are still opportunities for youth to complete court-ordered hours, but the focus has shifted more to an education garden for the entire community," says the Garden Project's associate director, Kate Niederehe. Although situated on school property, the Project remains a separate entity; it creates its programming and does its own fundraising.

On the garden's grounds, 14 chickens range freely among 55 fruit trees, including varieties of apricot, cherry, peach, plum, nectarine, apple and pear. Kids catch grasshoppers and feed them to the chickens — a literal hands-on lesson about the cycle of life. One hundred different varieties of vegetables, herbs, and flowers grow on the property.

The historic Shafer home located on the Youth Garden Project grounds, restored in 2002, serves as an office for garden employees. Additional buildings on-site include a grow dome, a hoop house, and a straw-bale greenhouse — extending the garden's growing season.

Gabriel Woyteck is the garden's year-round manager. He tends to the soil and compost, cares for the animals, and decides what to plant; a staff of four pitches in to help maintain the property. The garden also employs interns. Once a week, a couple of them help Woyteck harvest, wash and box "shares" of produce



for members of the garden's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program to come pick up.

Anna Bruno's 9-year old son, Andre, loves attending the spring break and summer camps, as well as afterschool programs that take place there. He comes home resembling "a mud ball," Bruno says. Andre "looks forward to every single day. It gets him excited about science. There are hands-on opportunities to play ... He learns about bugs and different

kinds of foods. It's been fantastic. I wish it had been available when I was a kid."

Olive Reese's mother, who works as a ranger at Arches National Park, says that the Youth Garden Project's summer camp is a great childcare option. "It's such a relief" to have it available, says Reese. "All of the staff there is amazing. Olive loves to go. Having it available — I'm really grateful. Raising my daughter in that kind of environment is important for me." At \$120 for the week (Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.), the camp is a good deal for families looking for summertime childcare that is also educational. Tuition assistance is available for low-income families.

Summer camps involve walks to nearby Mill Creek, where kids can take a dip in the water, or a stroll to Rotary Park to play on the musical playground. But "the garden is incorporated as much as possible," Niederehe says. Children help spread mulch, pull weeds, harvest vegetables and participate in other garden-related activities.

"Families get to see their kids coming home tired, and happy, and talking about the earth," Linford says. "They're a little more connected."



Outdoor classes

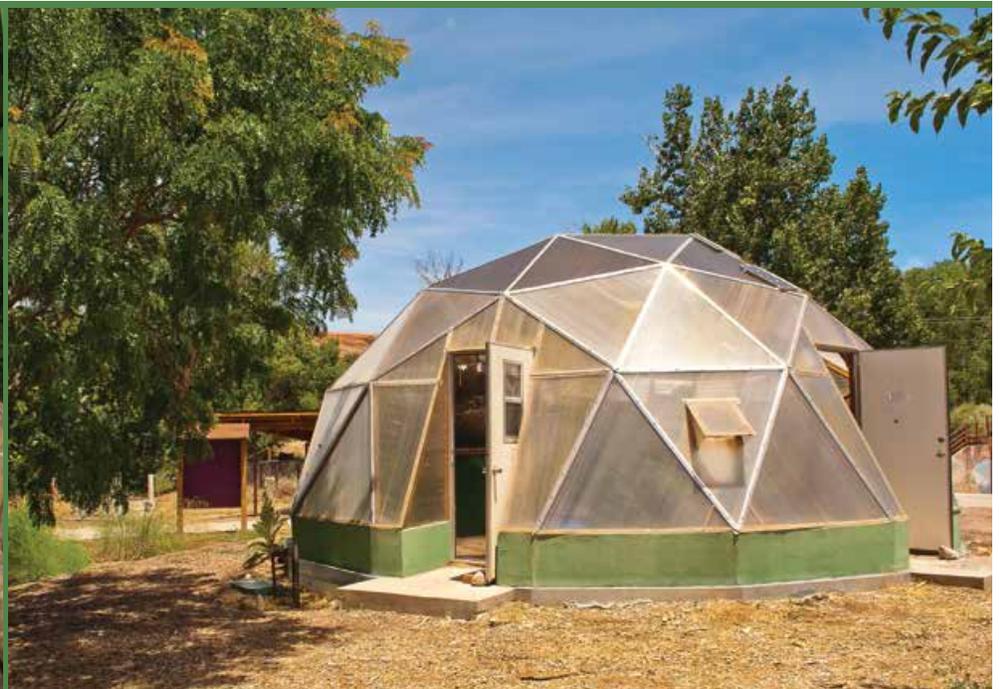
The Youth Garden Project also serves as an oasis-for-learning the rest of the year. It partners with the school district by hosting field trips; Helen M. Knight Elementary students in grades kindergarten through six, and Moab Charter School students, make forays to the garden each spring and fall. Children attending the BEACON Afterschool program participate in garden-focused activities each week.

Grand County Middle School's Environmental Science class began partnering with the Youth Garden Project in 2014. The older kids learn about the garden's growing cycle by turning compost, adding soil amendments, planting seeds, and harvesting vegetables and fruits.

Biology and Family and Consumer Science classes have also convened at the garden — an ideal space to learn about nature, and a welcome respite from the sterile confines of the classroom. High school students enrolled in photography or art classes engage with the garden in a more aesthetic way, by bringing their cameras and paintbrushes along to capture its natural beauty.



Tomato photo: ogurechko@adobestock.com



Community engagement

The garden engages with the entire community. Moab residents purchase fresh eggs from the garden, and participate in its CSA program. (Additional Youth Garden Project produce is sold at the Moab Farmers' Market every Friday from 4-7 p.m. at Swanny City Park, located at 100 West and Park Drive.)

Each spring, the Youth Garden Project also hosts a plant sale of vegetable starts — tomatoes, peppers, tomatillos, squash, cucumbers, plus fruit trees, flowers, and native perennials — that have been nurtured throughout the winter. "It's one of our biggest fundraisers," says Niederehe. "It's a happy day. People are excited about getting their own gardens going. It's fun to see youth getting excited and feeling the hype."

Every other Wednesday, from April through October (except during the hottest period of July), the garden hosts "Weed and Feed" events where community members are invited to come help pull unwelcome plants from the garden and then stay for dinner. Volunteer guest cooks prepare the meals, using food grown on the premises. "They provide amazing fresh dinners," says Reese, whose family has attended a couple of the "Weed and Feed" meals. "It's a win-win for everyone."

There are also "garden dinners," during which guests are treated to four-course meals while seated at tables throughout the garden. These events, which take place throughout the growing season, benefit not only local kids but the non-profit's community programs.

Jones has two children who attend Youth Garden Project summer camps. She says she goes to the plant sales each year, and participates in the CSA, where, in addition to receiving a weekly garden share, there is a basket of "giveaways" of extra produce from which to choose. "It's a neat opportunity to get introduced to new foods," she says.

In the spirit of community education, instructors teach a variety of sustainable gardening workshops throughout the year on topics ranging from seed germination to pruning and thinning fruit trees to installing irrigation systems, the basics of beekeeping, and creating compost. The classes are hardly limited to local flora and insects — not in this garden. Here, they also include a fowl option.

"In the past," says Niederehe, "we've taught people how to raise backyard chickens."

The Youth Garden Project is located at 530 South, 400 East Street in Moab. For more information or to sign up for the Garden's newsletter, "Never Miss a Beet," visit youthgardenproject.org.



A new director

Ruth Linford was fresh off a stint with Teach for America, where she'd been instructing low-income students in the Mississippi Delta region, when she arrived in Moab. The year was 2012, and she had come to YGP to work as a camp instructor.

"What I didn't realize was that summer would change everything I thought about education," Linford, 30, says. "It changed my career trajectory."

As a result of that single transformative season in the garden, Linford went on to focus on community education in graduate school. She became the YGP's executive director in April, having jumped at the opportunity to return to her home state, and a town she loves. Directing the garden, she says, fits perfectly with her passion for community education and providing a safe place for children.



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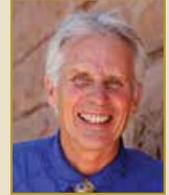
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