THE MEL JOHNSON SCHOOL GARDENING PROJECT

North of the 54th parallel in the small town of Wabowden, Manitoba, Canada, two school teachers, Eleanor Woitowicz and Bonnie Monias, are empowering their students with the knowledge, discipline and skills to grow their own food sustainably in backyard gardens. Over the past 5 years the teachers have set up 73 raised garden beds - each managed by a child - in a community of ~ 600 residents, the majority of whom are of Aboriginal or Métis heritage.

The Mel Johnson School gardening project was initiated in 2006, after teacher, Eleanor Woitowicz, attended the Veggie Adventures workshop, which encourages growing vegetables from seed in the classroom. Eleanor started growing plants with her 14 grade 3/4 students and - being an avid gardener herself – took a creative leap of faith and decided that each of her students should have their own vegetable garden at home.

4’x 8’ wooden boxes were constructed at the school and raised garden beds were set up in the students’ yards. Eleanor showed the students how to seed carrots, radishes, peas and onions directly into their gardens. Once it was warm enough she showed the students how to transplant the tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, zucchini, pumpkins…etc they had grown from seed in the
classroom. Regular visits throughout the entire season ensured that the students learned when and how to water, weed and take care of their vegetable gardens and when produce was ripe and ready to eat. In the fall the students’ successes were celebrated at the school’s Harvest Display and Community Feast, which is now an ever expanding annual event.

The success of this first gardening season has generated a keen interest in the younger students to follow in their peers footsteps, and the older students are continuing to grow their gardens year after year. For the 2011 season the number of gardens is anticipated to grow to 80-90. This season the “senior gardeners” are entering their 6th growing season and will be trained to become peer mentors to the next class of new gardeners.

In 2007, a 24’x 50’ greenhouse was constructed to extend the season and to start bedding plants for the gardens and flowers & herbs to sell as fundraisers to support the project. A wide variety of vegetables can be grown in the north because the longer daylight hours make up for the shorter growing season.

The program continues to innovate and expand. In 2009, students were paired with 6 elders to assist them with their gardens to develop better intergenerational understanding and
mutual appreciation. As of 2010 the schoolyard features 8 raised garden beds, a 450 plant strawberry patch, and some fruit trees.

The young Mel Johnson School gardeners are involved in every aspect of the process. In March they participate in selecting seeds from catalogues. Grow lights are used in the science room to germinate the plants. About mid-April the plants are transported into the greenhouse and every student helps with transplanting of flower plugs to prepare for the Grand Opening Fundraiser event in mid-May. Students volunteer their time to assist with planting, watering, fertilizing, weeding, maintaining, harvesting and cleaning up of the school gardens and working in the greenhouse.

The teachers have noticed the therapeutic aspects of gardening. Students who have difficulty learning in the classroom enjoy the hands-on aspects of working with plants and are very interested and willing to help out as much as is needed. Gardening is a great way to build character.

The school gardeners have inspired others to garden and positive impacts on the community are already being recognized. There has been an increase in the number of adult gardeners from 10 to 30 in 2010, when the community could boast 110 food gardens.

Students are re-connecting to the land and learning the traditional knowledge of growing their own food and understanding that it is a gift from the earth. The students are more caring towards the environment and the community they live in. They understand the importance of not using chemicals and the importance of composting to reduce waste recycle nutrients and improve the soil. Education is changing general attitudes and contributes to entire communities becoming more aware
of healthier lifestyle choices and sustainable practices. Vegetable & fruit trays are more frequently offered at birthday parties and community events.

A very important component of the project is that students learn to cook and preserve vegetables and fruits to encourage healthier eating habits and to provide opportunities to try new and different foods. The students are much more willing to taste the vegetables that they have grown themselves. At the end of the season the students assist with the preparation of food for their annual Harvest Display and Community Feast. This sharing of successes and food creates a great sense of pride in the students, their families and community.

The success of the Mel Johnson School Gardening Project has inspired sustainable food gardening in other schools and communities. The project has been recognized by the David Suzuki Foundation and by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, who selected it as one of the three best practices projects out of 60 projects from 30 countries. The teachers were invited to present on this project to the UN Commission in New York in May 2010.

In 2009, Katharina Stieffenhofer, a Winnipeg film-maker created a documentary about the project called “And This Is My Garden”. The film has screened widely across Canada & Internationally at film festivals and community events and is used as a resource at universities and other educational institutions.

The film has won “Most Inspirational Film” Award at the EcoFocus Film Festival in Athens, GA & Audience Award – “Inspiring Lives” at the Princeton Environmental Film Festival. ATIMG has been selected to screen at the Green Film Festival in Seoul, Korea, May 18 – 26. For more information: http://andthisismygarden.com
documentary film about the Mel Johnson School gardening project
by Katharina Stieffenhofer in association with Buffalo Gal Pictures
“...AND THIS IS MY GARDEN”