

## Kettle Moraine YMCA Early Learning Center Garden



In the outdoor play space at the Kettle Moraine YMCA's Early Learning Center, a Little Tike's Kitchen stands, covered in vining flowers. Tomatoes, carrots, peppers, peas, sweet corn, and sunflowers grow nearby. Children, ages three to five, are invited to come and help with planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting. Educators enjoy sharing the garden's many teachable moments with the center's thirty-six students, including the chance to taste test new veggies.

Kettle Moraine's Early Learning Center garden started in a space of just six square feet, when the center bought a two-by-three foot indoor greenhouse for students to start seeds in their classrooms. Parents donated seeds and compostable plant containers, and they were off and growing. "We decided to start the outdoor garden so the plants would continue to survive past the size they could reach in their indoor pots," Melissa Kescenovitz, the center's lead teacher and coordinator, said.



In addition to the modified Little Tikes Kitchen – which had holes drilled in its plastic bottom for water drainage – the center has a four-by-six foot in ground garden, and a four-by-four foot raised bed. This seemingly pint-sized garden has plenty growing in a small space. "We try to do unique varieties that are not served at lunch so the kids have the opportunity to eat different things," Kescenovitz said. "I'm hoping that the kids can start healthy at a younger age...that they can have the opportunity to taste different things so they can enjoy them as they get older, versus a child that wasn't exposed to them. This is when they're starting to develop those tastes that hopefully will stick with them throughout their lives."

Parents are taking notice, too. According to Kescenovitz, many enjoy the garden because they like the emphasis on healthy eating and an active lifestyle. "Many students are excited to tell their parents what they got to do or what they picked in the garden," Kescenovitz said. Many students also enjoy making the choice to

February 2014

*This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit [www.wischoolgardens.org](http://www.wischoolgardens.org).*



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taste the garden produce, and seeing the plants grow up from tiny seeds.

Each educator at the Early Learning Center is given the opportunity to attend a “Got Dirt?” garden training, which are hosted periodically at the Public Agency Center in West Bend. “Our raised bed even came from a ‘Got Dirt?’ training,” Kescenovitz said. “One of our teachers won it and donated it to the center.”

Kescenovitz sees the Early Learning Center garden, which started in 2012, continuing through many generations of little tikes. “We plan to continue gardening,” she said. “We may even expand it to give us the opportunity to plant other things we want to promote to the kids. Maybe things that I personally don’t even eat yet!”

The Early Learning Center is one of several early childhood programs at the Kettle Moraine YMCA. The Discovery Center—for infants to two year olds—and Our Savior’s Childcare Center—an off-site YMCA site for infants to five year old—also have early childhood gardens. WSGI is inspired by their efforts, and happy to celebrate their success! If you have an garden at your school or early childhood site, please email us at [wsgi@communitygroundworks.org](mailto:wsgi@communitygroundworks.org) - we’d love to hear your story and add you to our school garden map!

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