

St. Luke's Lutheran Preschool



Planting spring pansies at St. Lukes

When Courtney Stangl was a little girl, she used to sneak into her grandparents' garden and eat all the green beans as she could find. But a can of green beans for dinner that night? Forget about it. Today, Stangl's youthful ventures into the garden have come full circle at St. Luke's Lutheran Preschool, where she and a group of fellow early care educators – along with parents and church members – have embarked on a playground garden project. “Our goal is to begin growing more of our own food so the kids can see the whole process, from planting the seeds, to watering them, to having something to cook and eat,” she said.

Mirroring Stangl's own childhood stance on green beans, many kids at St. Luke's are picky eaters. “We often will have parents tell us they can't get their kids to eat vegetables at all,” Stangl reflected. “But they pick them up from school and the kids have tried tomatoes or beans. The kids know that they put work into growing something, so they don't want to throw it in the garbage – they want to eat it!”

The kick-off to St. Luke's playground garden began when Stangl took a gardening class with WSGI's Beth Hanna. Inspired, Stangl invited Hanna to visit St. Luke's in Waukesha for a garden training. “Beth just had this little spark of excitement, and it was contagious,” Stangl said. “The teachers just jumped into this project.” This fall, a local Boy Scout troop – led by the son of one of St. Luke's teachers – built five raised beds in different locations around the long, meandering playground. The playground, which is relatively shady, presented a challenge for growing sun-loving veggies. During WSGI's training, however, Hanna took the school's 26 staff on a guided walk through potential garden bed locations, choosing the sunniest spots and talking about which plants would thrive. “We even found some old grape vines, and Beth showed them to us like a clue,” Stangl said. “Now we knew we could plant grapes here and they would grow, even in the semi-shady areas.”

December 2015

This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit www.wischoolgardens.org.



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Early learners get involved with preparing healthy snacks, and crafting with seeds.

Once the beds were built, teachers wasted no time in getting their young students excited about the new garden. They organized a fall planting, and when the weather turned too cold for vegetables, took their garden enthusiasm indoors to begin preparing for spring. Seeds dot the classroom's sensory table, inspiring student questions about how to plant them, and how they will grow. Teachers read garden-themed books, and have even brought in fresh fruits and veggies to begin cooking with students. With a kitchen on site, teachers – and kids! – are looking forward to cooking with their own garden produce next spring.

“The kids keep saying, ‘We want to start now!’ Stangl said. “It’s just been such a cool process, and I totally blame Beth for everything! She lit this fire under us. We even put the word out to parents and church members, and formed a garden committee from people who wanted to help out.”

To maintain the garden, the committee created a calendar that assigns each of the school's classrooms one day each week to water, weed, and care for plants. Committee members can sign up for garden duties on weekends or days when school is not in session. The committee also hopes to develop areas in the garden that are appropriate for different age groups – St. Luke's youngest learner is just six weeks old, and in summer, the oldest is thirteen – including areas for sensory experiences and quiet reflection. Parents have also volunteered to help out with garden cooking activities during school hours. As a parent herself, Stangl understands the enthusiasm to help young learners discover new culinary experiences, and what a huge role a garden can play in trying new things.

“My four year old would not eat a tomato,” Stangl recalls. “But my mom has her own garden, so I asked if my daughter could have a little section to grow a tomato of her own. She will not eat a tomato from the store, but she devours the ones she grew!” Stangl hopes that the enthusiasm behind growing your own will spread among the parents and young learners at St. Luke's, and beyond. “This work is so important,” she said. “Keep reaching out to other schools and kids to grow gardens. It's a great bond between home and school.”

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