

Young gardeners' greener thumbs...

pondering principles, policies and practises for edible-gardening

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Visit our UNE ECE website: www.une.edu.au/study/early-childhood/

ECA Biennial Conference, Canberra, 2008

Paper no 233, 4 October, Stream: Environment and Sustainability

Abstract

Young gardeners' greener thumbs begin with principles and policies that can help educators be leaders of children's *double-green-thumbs edible-gardening*. Within a caring and respectful approach, professionals can explore and reflect upon principles and policies that intertwine children and adults, edible plants and local settings. They can brainstorm ones most relevant for their workplaces. Professionals may then build upon principles and policies by discussing and creating children's gardening opportunities that are: *au naturale*, wise and wild, slow and seasonal. Such learning opportunities encompass children understanding (head), believing (heart) and doing (hands); and, they involve growing a variety of plant foods: leafy vegetables, root vegetables, salad greens, fruit vegetables, berries, herbs. Professionals can share planning ideas that might emerge from children's everyday lives but also extend beyond them. This paper focuses on organic gardening that makes minimal ecological footprints and links to place, space, time and eating what is grown. The value and relevance of children's edible-gardening is explored by comparing and contrasting it with contemporary influences -- personal sensory awareness, family-cultural experiences and a consumer-focused society.

Introduction

This paper begins with pondering. My prologue for pondering and exploring is... *within a caring and respectful framework, children and adults, edible plants and local climates can be meaningfully intertwined*. Examples of meaningful intertwining ideas are: lifestyle not 'diet'; food learning not dietetics and nutrition; foods, servings and meals not just vitamins and minerals; food origins and types not just organisations' food goals. So, what is considered and why? The focus is on natural or organic gardening which links to consideration of place and time, includes eating and makes minimal ecological footprints. The value of children's edible gardening is pondered in counter-point with contemporary, consumer-focused features of society.

A greener thumbs framework with principles and policies

Understanding and committing to an everyday-food-ways approach within early childhood education is at once historical even archaeological (Hicks & Beaudry, 2006), cultural (Parkins & Craig, 2006) and sociological (McCrea, 1996a), political (Barbee, 2004), social anthropological, at times philosophical (Allhoff & Monroe, 2007; de Botton, 2001) and/or a matter of ethics (Singer & Mason, 2006). For example, consider Epicurus and the idea of being an epicurean or lover of excellent food (de Botton, 2001, p. 50). Such an everyday-food-ways approach has gardens, gardeners and gardening as central tenants. People with 'green thumbs' enjoy gardening and their plantings actually grow well. 'Double green' means you are not only gardening but you are doing it doubly-well; because you are using *au naturale* places and caring practices. A greener thumbs framework can be created or displayed as a collection of principles and related policies that support the above intertwining of people and

places. Principles and policies can help educators be leaders of children's *double-green-thumbs edible-gardening*. Concepts or big ideas give added relevance and worth to deciding to be green and actually doing green; concepts form an initial pathway for then identifying one's principles and policies.

Double-green-thumb concepts

Concepts provide justifications or rationales for plans and actions; concepts are educational reasons for undertaking shared edible gardening with young children. Here are a few overarching concepts. Firstly, a foodcycle or food spiral offers an encompassing path along which producing or gardening is one stopping point of six food-related positions – producing, processing, purchasing, preparing, partaking, processing wastes into wants (Appleton, McCrea & Patterson, 1999, pp. 37-42; McCrea, 2003). Another guiding concept is the importance of early childhood staff as foodie-role-takers (McCrea, 2006, pp. 21-22). Such roles can be broad, a 'facilitator of foods' (McCrea, 1995, p. 23); but, more often they will be focused and interchangeable - food educator, naturalist, socialiser/socialite, wise consumer, nutritionist, caretaker (McCrea, 1994, pp. 227-234). Learning events can be conceptualised as HHH and thus encompass children understanding (head), believing (heart) and doing (hands). Eating what has been grown ought to be viewed as an act of socialness (McCrea, 2006, p. 11; McCrea, 2005; Visser, 1991). Conceptualising children's tastings and meals as memorable relational moments means that each time foods are shared with others in slow, caring settings they may become fond food memories for later life (McCrea, 2006). And, this concept is deepened when tastes come from plants that children have grown, especially during supportive interactions with educators and parents. Of course, the education ideal of authentic integrated curriculum (Berman & Fromer, 1991; Starbuck, Olthof & Midden, 2002) can be informed by gardens, gardeners and gardening. These big picture ideas help educators move to identifying principles.

Double-green-thumb principles

Our food-related beliefs can link to theories, such as health promotion (Appleton, McCrea & Patterson, 1999, pp. 8-11; Nutbeam & Harris, 2004). Beliefs can be seriously questioned and deeply thought-about in terms of food being more than a four-letter-word; that is 'philosophical rumination' (Allhoff & Monroe, 2007, p. 2). What we understand or value shapes our lives and for educational purposes ethical understandings can be documented as principles. Principles might be defined as a 'public self-definition' about what a group of people or an organisation wants to do or commit to (Edwards, 2006, p. 24). Principles can be created as a 'nuanced, dynamic and multidimensional portrait' (Edwards, 2006, p. 23) of ... [in this case, I propose a portrait with] *caring, very green edible gardening* as an integral aspect of children's everyday living and learning. Principles may be qualified as fundamental, model, major, basic, precautionary, with criteria, with intents, or even challenges (Edwards, 2006). Formats for displaying principles vary, but most seem to share a similar layout. Some examples of introductory stems with follow-on items are (Edwards, 2006):

- A XXX is one which... recognises or values or employs...;
- The XXX offers principles or guidepost and they are: One, two, three...;

- *The earth charter* has a preamble paragraph, a list of focal declarations, followed by broad areas of concern with several principles each... respect, care, build, protect, etc. (Edwards, 2006, pp. 41-46);
- A position statement followed by 'we believe...', 'therefore it is necessary to implement...' and 'the process...'; and,
- A listing of principles with each explored as: what this means, why this is important and ways to do this (NADF, 2007).

With the above descriptions of what principles can be and may look like, educators can move to deeply thinking about what relevant ideas they want to enshrine as principles for *double-green-thumbs edible gardening*. Following are some possible starting points that could be re-shaped as principles. I believe that many living and learning understandings interlink with children's edible gardening; such understandings:

- encompass and link children's attitudes, abilities and actions;
- value cooperation and respect among adults and between adults and children;
- support gender awareness and cultural equity within a rights framework;
- facilitate empowerment of adults' and children's food-life-abilities;
- define food-related events holistically in the context of both sensitive everyday life and desirable early learning, including links with local community;
- consider food-related experiences with passion and as pleasurable, this is beyond food as fun;
- respect natural and human worlds as intertwined, encompassing inter-generational care;
- propose relationships and personal competencies that reflect adult-child interdependence; and,
- reflect ideas of food as shared social capital and a collective responsibility for healthier foods and meaningful meals (McCrea, 2002).

Double-green-thumb policies

After establishing principles, educators design relevant policies that inform their approaches to the everyday with children. Policies assist educators with determining what specific activities and events will look like; that is, what things will be done and how they will be done. One useful format for policies begins with an aim moves to an explanation and then provides an implementation (CCCC, 1988, pp. 16-18). Here is a brief example...

Aim: The daily program is designed to assist children's gradual understanding of their own personal health needs. ... Through suitable food experiences, each child's total development is enhanced.

Explanation: Food living – Educators will work parents to provide a variety of foods suitable for their children. ... *Food learning* – Educators will provide learning experiences for children that enhance understanding about our food world and development of healthier eating habits. ...

Implementation: Food living – Meals will happen in a social setting where a whole group meets together, noting that sometimes individual and small group opportunities are valuable and appropriate. ... *Food learning* – Through hands-on food experiences children create, explore the environment, learn problem solving and experience personal interactions and encounter foods from other cultures. ... (Appleton, McCrea & Patterson, 1999, pp. 167-169).

There are many sources of early childhood policies that relate to edible gardening; one of these is Early Childhood Australia and the ECA Position Statements which are available online.

Exploring double-green-thumb practises

With a rock-solid foundation for one's personal or collective commitment to *young gardeners' greener thumbs*, principles and policies can shape garden happenings. Meaningful edible gardening processes or practicalities encompass: plans, plots, pace, plants, planting styles, propagate, pick & prepare, portfolios, pondering and succession planning.

Children and adults discuss, brainstorm, research, and then make *plans* of edible gardens for now and later; and, these gardens are extra eco-friendly and more rather than less sustainable. They identify *plots* and places (patches, pots & pergolas) for planting and consider soil types. They take account of the everyday *pace* of life – time for full growth, two/four seasons, climates – micro, meso, macro. They decide what to *plant* and what forms, such as seeds, seedlings, small plants, even sprouts. Plant foods include: leafy vegetables, root vegetables, salad greens, sprouted grains, fruit vegetables, herbs, berries and vines. For *styles of planting*, greener thumb gardeners use natural approaches – so, be organic (McCrea, 1996b), do try no-dig (Deans, 1979), incorporate at least some wild and wise, also do some permaculture (Holmgren, 2004; Nuttall, 1996) in slow and seasonal ways, even consider a little biodynamics (Kemp, 2004). Natural gardening means working with nature as we grow plants and care for soils; thus, garden without artificial chemicals (pesticides, fungicides, hormones) or synthetic fertilisers, do select non-GMO seeds or seedlings. Using a blend of planting styles, children and adults arrange plants as companions, a wild look. They also arrange plants by their varying growth habits plus water and sunlight needs (NADF, 2007; Nuttall, 1996, pp. 66-69). They carefully *propagate* veggies with minimal use of tools such as digging forks, use mulch instead. They establish a worm farm, make compost to mix with existing soil, prepare compost teas, and top-dress plots and places with water-saving, weed-preventing mulches - the bigger pieces that form a protective blanket over the soil and around plants. Worms, plant byproducts and top-dress mulches reflect cycles of life, death and decay. When edible plants are mature –flowers, seeds, fruits, leaves and stems – children and adults *pick* them for sometimes saving seeds for later plantings (Fanton & Fanton, 1993) and mostly *preparing* edibles for tastes. Greener thumbs people document their plans and all the ongoing efforts in *plant portfolios*. Finally, children and adults *ponder* what they have done and what has happened to then begin planning new

foodcycles. For continuous gardening, they will have several simultaneous garden cycles progressing at different stages – *succession planning*.

If children and adults relate and interact meaningfully as greener thumbs gardeners, then children will be...

- ❑ communing with nature – balance natural/built worlds; connect with & respect - lifecycles, climate & weather, bees & worms, sun & moon, soil & water;
- ❑ moving actively outdoors - bend & stretch one's body; observe & sometimes touch nature;
- ❑ refining sensory awareness – particularly scents & flavours, calm silence;
- ❑ creating habits of mind – personal dispositions of wonder about a healthier world; ethos of stewardship & non-violence;
- ❑ developing belief-links between edible gardening and socialness of food – kitchen garden (Alexander, 2006); habits of eating; kitchen as hearth; calm edible routines & rituals;
- ❑ engaging in all kinds of emergent development & curricula learning – social, emotional, spiritual... deBono (1987) thinking hats; Gardner (Denig, 2004) intellegences & integrated science, maths, problem solve (Wilson, 2008);
- ❑ using natural approaches to produce foods – greener actions via organic, no dig, permaculture result in au naturale, wise and wild, slow and seasonal;
- ❑ caring for food plants – involvement, real work (Readdick & Douglas, 2000; Wenning & Wortis, 1985), collectively pamper over-time;
- ❑ sharing relevant tools – taking turns & responsible use; thin tyne fork, rake, hoe, handdigger, magnifying glass, thermometer, calendar;
- ❑ playing with ideas by painting, rubbing, drawing, writing, photographing – art & literacy tools for garden images, signs, charts, stories;
- ❑ planning ahead from planting to picking to preparing food – use veggie picto-recipes, develop reverence for plant transformations into edible items; and,
- ❑ building rich personal memories of foodcycles for future meditation - plants becoming tasty morsels, memories of kitchen smells, remembering flavours.

So, what broader implications arise from these concepts, principles, policies and everyday practises that can shape and support young gardeners' greener thumbs?

Implications of greener thumb principles, policies and practises

The value and relevance of children's edible-gardening can be explored by comparing and contrasting our edible eco-footprints with contemporary influences -- personal sensory awareness, family-cultural experiences and a consumer-focused society. This exploration can be two-ways. The broader socio-cultural and political features of society influence who educators and young children are and what they believe in, plus how they act each day – daily habits. Certainly, educators' and childrens' values about and actions for edible gardening reflect contemporary society. However, if educators, parents and children commit their heads, hearts and hands to *double-green-thumbs edible gardening*, they may in turn counter-influence the world beyond an early childhood service. As a collective they can act locally to raise issues about valuing the everyday greenness of edible planting and more natural tastings. Centre collectives can go out into the community as greener thumb advocates (McCrea, 2005). To assist with this greener thumb community advocacy, adults and children can seek out documents and information from organisations (Edwards, 2006) that will assist them with forming public messages and local actions. Trying to counter media messages is a major challenge for educators and parents, as are their interactions with young children in terms of decoding advertising messages (Barbee, 2004; Chiras, 2005; McCrea, 2005; Palmer, 2007). What about a manifesto or two? One example is the Slow Food movement's *Official Manifesto for the International Movement for the Defense of the Right to Pleasure* (Parkins & Craig, 2006, p. 141); or, check out CSPI, Pesticide Action Network and others (refer to WWW references that follow). Pondering young gardeners' greener thumbs is worthwhile personally, for family and within community.

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