

Lessons rooted in the soil

They may have just hiked 40 minutes from their school, Quilchena elementary in Richmond, but the 24 rosy-cheeked Grade 3 and 4 students who show up around 9:30 a.m. still have energy to burn. Even discounting the walk back after class, they'll need it. Ian Lai is waiting at the entrance to the community garden. As the kids perch nearby, he details what's on the agenda today, and it's earth-moving. A chef-instructor at

Northwest Culinary Academy of Vancouver, Lai spearheads the Edible Schoolyard Project, which lets students see how food gets from the farm to the kitchen table, covering everything from soil preparation to harvest. Good nutrition and care of the land are only two of the lessons they learn.

Lai learned a few himself growing up in South Africa, working in the family garden, studying criminology and psychology at SFU, being "a hippie in India for a while", and teaching English in Japan. Inspiration behind this particular project was a course at UBC's Summer Institute program last August, which paired East Side students with retired farmers. "I saw a

vision of kids eating healthy," Lai says. "I thought 'If I can get kids to grow the food.'" It's gardening as education.

Fired with ideas, he started a site search that led to the two-acre Sharing Farm that is part of the city-owned Terra Nova Rural Park. Excess food grown here is donated to the Richmond Food Bank, 8,000 kilograms from one-acre

South Dyke (the original Sharing Farm site) last year alone. The infrastructure was

there, says Lai, but he had to pitch the idea. His daughter's school, Quilchena elementary, was first to sign on and now gardens four of the three-by-seven-metre plots. One nearby is reserved for a local after-school program, and others are set aside for Spul'u'kwuks elementary. This year's plans include a winter garden; a "Three Sisters garden" comprising beans, squash, and corn; a sunflower house; and bean trellises. Rotating crops are on the syllabus for 2007. It's all run by volunteers with Lai's involvement (officially one day a week but invariably more semi-funded by his employer). Sharing Farm provides land and equipment. In "the hierarchy of the tools, big

shovels rule," Lai says with a laugh.

West Coast Seeds donates all the seeds. The day before this visit, Lai portioned out enough for two full beds, adopting the square-foot rather than the traditional "row" method of planting; he says it uses 80 percent less water, labour, and land. Small plastic vials were labelled with the number of seeds to be planted per square, and how many days until harvest. Once emptied, the vials double as seed markers. Also organized are Popsicle sticks, plastic identification tags, and tiny petri dishes, most found at Urban Source (3126 Main Street), which sells reclaimed materials. Everything is housed in a long wooden box that Lai unearthed in a thrift store. He has nailed together wood strips in half-metre-by-half-metre squares (like a kid's drawing of a window) to make it easy to position seeds properly. Raised beds are framed in lumber from former telephone poles. A major lesson communicated here is the importance of recycling.

It's starting to drizzle. "How much water does the plant need when it rains?" one boy asks when Lai invites questions. "Can we have a drink from the tap?" adds another.

Among the seeds they'll plant today are Easter-egg radish, rapini, and mizuma. Later in the season, each group will also be assigned one heritage seed to raise through its life cycle and hand on to the next generation to the next class.

Everyone gets to work. Kids who scored shovels move earth from a big dark mound into beds. Others plant, including teacher Lee Hunter. Hunter pours the tiny seeds into petri dishes, then uses the vial to make two parallel rows of four holes, subtly pointing out that eight can be made up of four plus four, or two times four, or eight times one.

Best Eats Angela Murrills



FOOD OF THE WEEK

> BY ANGELA MURRILLS

Confession time. I lost the notes I made when we stopped in at Mirchi Indian Cuisine (7964 Granville Street, 604-266-7000), but I do remember a couple of carefully assembled salads, terrific little tidbits of grilled chicken, some chai, and paying around \$20. There were no dosas available that night (best to call ahead if that's what you're after), so a return visit is needed to try those and other South Indian specialties, like the small steamed rice cakes called *idlis*. Tandoori and butter chicken, *pulaos*, curries, and smoked-salmon samosas are also on the menu, plus plenty for vegetarians. This is a little family-run spot, and it shows in the food and the service, right down to the zingy, freshly made chutneys. Open daily from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.



Using donated materials and volunteer time, Ian Lai of Richmond's Sharing Farm teaches youngsters an earthy course in nutrition. Shawn Taylor photo.

That's right—his class is studying "measurement for math, farming for social studies, plant studies for science. The novel in language arts is set on a farm. It's all integrated."

Lai sees his edible school yard as just the beginning. He would love to have a kitchen that would enable

him to show the progression from seed to table and dreams of teaming up, via Web cam, with a school doing a similar project overseas. Will the idea spread? "I think other schools would like to, but I have to find time and resources," Lai says. "Hopefully, this will be a model." ♦