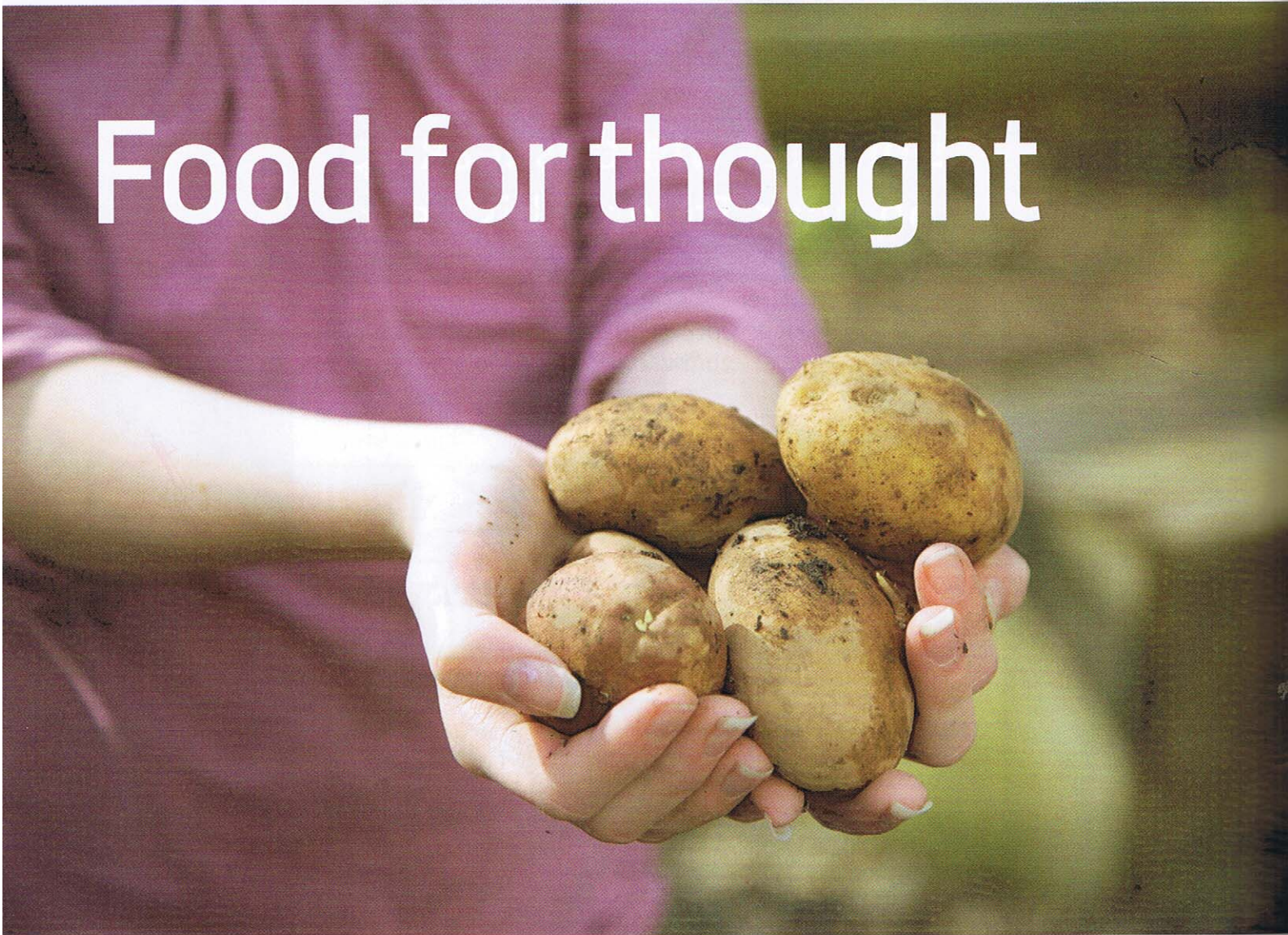


# Food for thought



## Students grow more than veggies, herbs and sunflowers in school gardens

By Sandy Fife

**E**VERY JUNE, kids at St. Jerome Catholic School in Edmonton plant a vegetable garden – mainly potatoes, which are easy to plant, require little maintenance and produce a bountiful harvest. Students learn to weed, water, compost, till the soil and hill the veggies. In fall when they return to school, they help harvest and eat their crop. In 2005, the first year of their garden, they held a Harvest Fest where classes presented potato projects and everybody chowed down on baked spuds with tasty toppings. Last year, the produce went into a delicious soup served at the school's Feast of St. Jerome celebration.

The St. Jerome potato patch is one of many Canadian school vegetable gardens started with assistance from Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds. The not-for-profit organization, dedicated to promoting environmental education through the country's schoolyards, has provided seed money (literally), expert advice and other resources for food gardens to 80 schools across the country in the past four years.

"We believe food is a key entry point to some of our most pressing environmental issues," says Cam Collyer, Director of Learning Grounds. "School food gardens are a captivating doorway into food science and a potent



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starting place for teaching ecological literacy.”

And much more – at St. Jerome, teachers have used the vegetable garden as inspiration for teaching not just for biology, horticulture and nutrition, but also for subjects such as history (the Irish potato famine), art (potato stamps) and creative writing (potato poems!).

“This project is a wonderful example of how a simple potato plot can be a very rich learning resource for all grades, all subjects,” says Kathy Goble, the Learning Grounds associate who provided the expertise St. Jerome needed to build its garden. “It’s always rewarding planting with kids. Digging in the dirt is just plain fun, and with a potato plot, the harvest is like digging for buried treasure. The kids are so excited about what they find under the potato plant!”

### Brain food

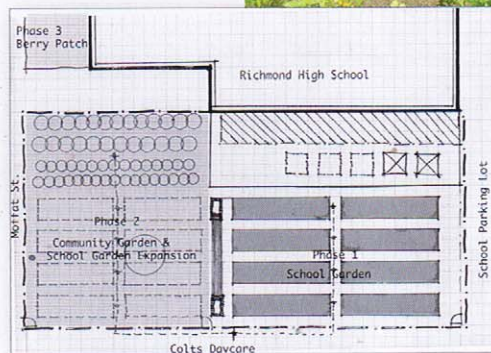
According to a Learning Grounds survey in 2006, most school food gardens are present at elementary schools, and grow an average of five different vegetables, with potatoes, carrots, beans, tomatoes, beets, sunflowers, herbs, lettuce and squash as the most successful crops. Sixty-five per cent of the gardens cost less than \$2,000 to start and 24 per cent cost less than \$500, with fencing as the biggest expense.

That’s pretty reasonable, considering that 90 per cent of the teachers at the schools use the gardens for teaching, class parties and snacks. And with the growing concern of child obesity rates, it looks like these school food gardens are an even better bargain – 91 per cent of the schools believed food gardens foster an awareness of nutritious food in students.

This is certainly the case at Richmond Secondary School in Richmond, B.C., where students in the Fit for Life program have learned to prepare healthy lunch salads and compared the nutritional value of various veggies, kids in Culinary Arts have cooked with the vegetables and herbs and learned to mill grains into flour, and Pre-Employment students helped prepare the site, planted potatoes and made bread.

### Gardens help build community

The Richmond Secondary food garden started with four planters in spring 2008, says Delores Altin, the project’s Learning Grounds associate. Last school year, the garden grew 2.5 times its original size, and now includes grains, a strawberry patch, a picnic table, a greenhouse and storage



Above: St. Jerome's school garden. Left: Richmond Secondary plot plan.

shed, as well as 13 community garden plots for seniors living in the neighbourhood, who help tend the school plot in summer. What was once an underused

strip of lawn is now a lush, productive, beautiful environment which also serves as a focal point for learning.

Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds continues to provide resources for the garden's growth. There are plans to add edible native berries and perennials, upgrade the drip irrigation system, save seeds of heirloom beans and vegetables, and start seedlings in the school's greenhouse. A main focus continues to be integration between the community and student gardeners, along with the involvement of preschoolers and their moms from the adjoining daycare, which will help make the food garden sustainable in the long-term, says Altin.

“Seeing teens work alongside seniors was a sign that we could achieve our goal of a school/community garden,” says Ian Lai, a Richmond Chef-Educator and school garden founder who coordinates the garden at Richmond Secondary and trains student interns to maintain it and coordinate volunteers during the summer.

Toyota Evergreen Learning Grounds believes that the Richmond Secondary model, which combines school and community gardens, is a blueprint other schools can follow. Neighbourhood involvement will increase the success of school food gardens, create educational opportunities for children and promote healthy-eating and community-building. It will serve as a more productive use of the school grounds at the neighbourhood level, while providing a venue for education, healthy-eating and stronger community ties. ■