

## community

## I Volunteer: Ian Lai

## Lai helps season schoolyard project

by Arlene Kroeker

Columnist

As an instructor at the Northwest Culinary Academy in Vancouver, Ian Lai discovered that his students knew little about where their food originated.

"Does this rutabaga grow above the ground or below?" he asked. No one knew. One day, in 2005, he drove by London Farm and thought: why not start a project through which children connect with the earth?

"In the beginning," he says, "I thought I'd put in an hour a day, puttering around."

Lai requested garden space in Terra Nova Community Garden and he enlisted a Grade 3 class from Quilchena Elementary to embark on a journey of exploration with the earth, the community around them and agriculture.

Today, the Terra Nova Schoolyard Project includes 170 students from six schools. The City of Richmond has donated over 5,000 square feet of gardening space and is constructing an on-site kitchen scheduled for completion in summer 2007.

The well-received project seems to

**I Volunteer**

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•To find other volunteer opportunities, visit [www.volunteerrichmond.ca](http://www.volunteerrichmond.ca) or call Volunteer Richmond Information Services at 604-279-7020.

•I Volunteer is a bi-weekly feature in The Richmond Review profiling volunteers and opportunities.

have effortlessly unfolded, but that wouldn't have been possible without Lai's investment of hundreds of hours. It's not so much the physical aspect that requires the time, it's the administration: e-mails, site visits and meetings with officials and graphic designers.

In the off-season, Lai spends 30 hours a month in preparation for the upcoming season, and that doesn't include the three hours a day that his mind is preoccupied with strategies and ideas. When the season arrives, Lai logs in 80 plus hours per month.

Yes, it's a time-consuming project, he says, especially since he has a full-time job and a full-time family. Lai's supportive wife and daughter know that what he does is for a greater

cause and it keeps him happy. For Lai, teaching the kids and giving them the earth and all that it holds is his reward.

"If they taste what they grow and it tastes good, they will eat it again and begin a lifelong healthy association with food."

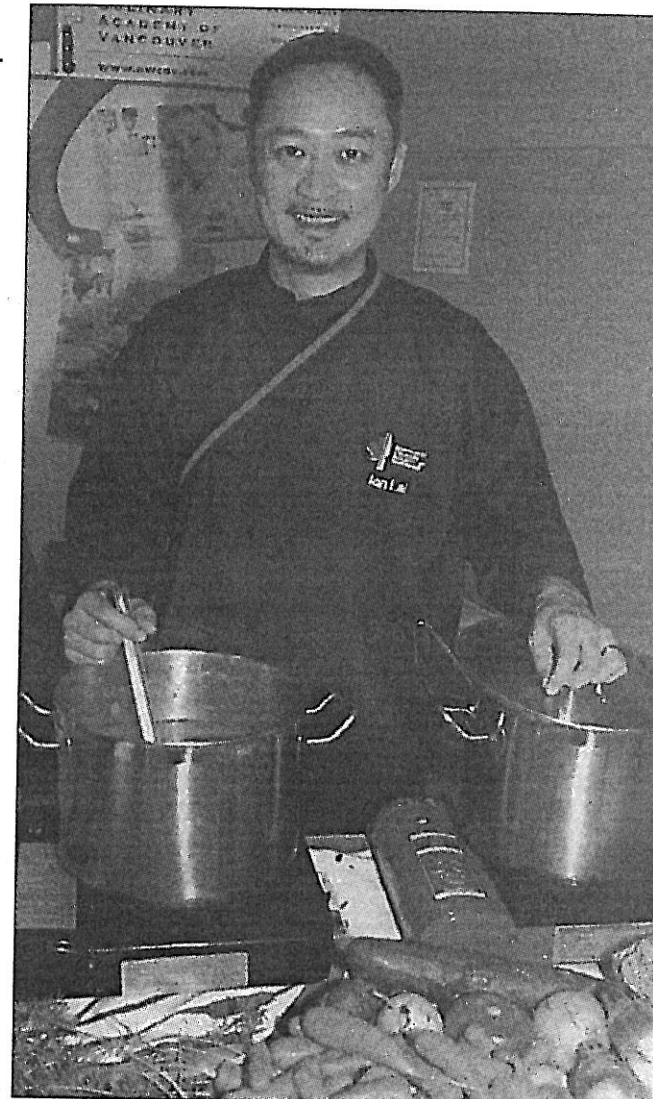
As the students connect to the earth, they hone their math, science and social skills by planning the garden. They care for worm composts in classrooms. They plant, weed, harvest and give the extra bounty to the food bank.

For most, this is new. For all, it's a wondrous thing to be told to get dirty.

Lai's students also develop hope for the future, respect for the earth. They also learn the earth's common language regardless of age, culture or physical limitations.

Lai, with the help of fellow garden-loving volunteers, will continue to invest his time in expanding the project and raising money to purchase garden tools, soil and educational materials.

"The project is making a difference. I see it in the kids," he says. "Down the road something might click, and the project will have grown engaged citizens."



Mark Patrick photo  
**Chef Ian Lai is helping educate kids on where their food comes from.**