

Case study: Cottonwood Head Start Garden – turning a wasted space into a place for learning about food production and sustainability.

When we arrived at the Cottonwood Head Start to see the space where one of the teachers wanted to put a school garden, what we found was a hot, rock covered space between two buildings that was never used. It appeared that at one time someone had attempted a small garden plot only to abandon it some time later.



A year and a half later they are starting their second full year garden. Some of the children’s grand parents and volunteers removed all the rock, the dry, compacted dirt beneath was roto-tilled, and volunteers built some kid-sized planters. The spaces between the planters were covered with four inches of wood chips sourced from a local tree trimmer, the planters were filled with a planting mix purchased in bulk and partly donated by a nursery.

The first summer, just after school was out volunteers planted a three sisters garden so when the kids came back in the fall they would be able to see and learn about the plants of their new garden, and get started planting a fall garden. When they returned to school they found corn, squash, melons, beans, tomatoes and flowers, plus a new bed for each class ready to plant.



The school garden is now an outdoor classroom. Compost, a worm composting area, and rainwater harvesting that irrigates the garden are all a part of the new, sustainable environment. It has attracted

third grade teachers from the neighboring elementary school whose students now also work and learn in the garden and act as mentors and “reading buddies” for the head start students.

When we went to install a drip irrigation system in March 2015, we had to rake away some of the wood chips from the pathways. We were astonished to find damp black soil filled with earthworms! The wood chips act as a natural “sponge” for catching and conserving rainwater, a natural weed barrier and they contribute microorganisms to the planters as they break down.



The Cottonwood Head Start school garden serves 100+ children ages 3-5 years old and their families. It is a place to learn about growing plants, about healthy nutrition, and about caring for the environment. At the same time children gain valuable knowledge about sustainability concepts, science, mathematics, and develop their language and artistic skills.

The garden has contributed to community building by being a place for families to gather, work together, learn together and celebrate. It has created community connections with gardeners, other educators, community groups and businesses in the area.

To learn more about this garden and to view a gallery of the work in progress visit:
<http://gardensforhumanity.org/cottonwood-head-start-garden/>

