

## **Tuolumne County School Gardens**

### **by Margaret Klein**

Last fall, a group of enthusiastic teens spoke to the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors about their vegetable garden at **Shaw's Flat School**. They told how they use the fresh garden vegetables in their cooking and nutrition classes where they are learning about healthy eating and how to prepare delicious nutritional food. The teens presented each board member with a quart of minestrone soup they made using vegetables from the school garden.

They also served their soup to the volunteer master gardeners who maintained the garden during the students' summer absence. The garden project is directed by their teacher, Joann Job and supported by Master Gardener volunteer Alexis Halstead, with initial contact by Master Gardener Julie Segerstrom. The students planted the garden using vegetable 'starts' obtained from the Waldorf School Garden plant sale and from Master Gardener Katy Wheeler's greenhouse.

The teens are replanting the garden again this spring. This year some of them will work maintaining the garden through the summer, harvesting and using the fresh vegetables. The teens also are learning how to identify both helpful insects and garden pests and are learning ways to keep their garden healthy without using harmful chemicals. They are an active inquisitive group of students, eager to learn, and enjoying their beautiful productive garden.

There are a number of active school gardens in Tuolumne County. Kids learn best from 'hands on' experiences and will remember what they learned. They love to work in the garden. They enjoy digging and preparing the soil, planting, watering and watching the plants grow. They will taste and enjoy eating vegetables they didn't think they liked. It's a natural way for kids to learn and hopefully will instill an interest through their adult life.

- **Chinese Camp** students planted a vegetable garden mid February. With the direction and support of Master Gardener, Bob Behee, the students moved an existing raised bed to a new sunny location. The students pulled weeds, helped move the soil and amended the soil by adding turkey compost. They planted radish and carrot seeds and transplanted vegetable starts, lettuce, broccoli, sweet peas, and spinach. The students will take over the care of the garden and enjoy their fresh veggies. Master Gardener Bob Behee is constructing a simple heavy wire 'cage' for the students to use to compost fruit and vegetable scraps from the lunch kitchen and provide their own soil amendment. The raised bed is 30 inches by 16 feet, easy for short arms to reach across to garden. The project has been kept simple to provide a resource for the school curriculum but not be a cumbersome burden for busy teachers and staff.
- The **Sonora Elementary** third grade garden is a stellar project, incorporated into the curriculum by teacher Mike Miller. The project has expanded to involve parents and other community volunteers and agencies to teach students about healthy diets and growing their own fresh food. Master Gardener Ulysses Verceles and third grade teacher Mike Miller designed the garden last summer. With the help of volunteers and community donations, they constructed raised beds, an irrigation system, and a compost bin. A very creative deer deterrent was added, using a motion detector and sprinkler

system. Master Gardener Katy Wheeler supplied plants and assisted with the garden. Students are actively involved planting, caring for the garden and enjoying the vegetables they grow. The “Union Democrat” article on February 10<sup>th</sup> colorfully described the project and the student and parent involvement in detail.

- **The Waldorf School** also has an active school garden with the leadership and support of Molly Ragland, teacher and Master Gardener. They have a successful project without using raised beds. The students plant, care for the garden and harvest the produce. Starts from this garden are sold at a spring fundraiser.
- **Jamestown Elementary** also has an established school garden that has been in use for several years. The school staff installed raised beds, a much needed irrigation system for the sunny dry climate of the lower elevation and a metal easy-to-use compost bin for the garden. Well-established herb and flower beds provide year around use for students. Master Gardener volunteers work with primary after-school-program students twice monthly. The students add compost to the beds, plant starts and seeds and work on various projects using organic materials.
  - In the fall, students pruned fragrant rosemary and lavender and made ‘herb bouquets’ to hang in their homes.
  - In December, the students made evergreen swags for the holidays, using sugar pine cones and assorted greens gathered from the forest.
  - Seventh grade students harvested basil and herbs and made pesto in their classroom.
  - Another class planted and harvested tomatoes.
  - Fifth graders made wonderful scarecrows with straw and cast offs in the fall.The garden is fenced from animals and provides a friendly comfortable place for students to work and learn.

School gardens provide a basis for students to continue gardening practices later as adults. They have ‘hands on’ experience learning ways to deal with garden pests, without use of harmful chemicals, and to keep the garden free of harmful insects, slugs, etc. Science lessons come alive and are more fun. Students can learn plant parts, function and processes easily with concrete evidence available in the garden.

School garden projects provide an excellent supplemental resource for classrooms and students, but must be kept simple to make them ‘user friendly’ and not make an added burden for very busy teachers who already have the day filled with required curriculum, activities and meetings. School budgets are stretched and not available for gardening projects. Master Gardener volunteer support is available, and there are some funds for basic gardening needs. Master Gardeners can work with the schools to set up a garden space and provide support for school gardens. For more information, call 209.533.5696.

*Margaret Klein has been actively involved with school gardens since becoming a Master Gardener in April, 2009.*