

## Reaping the benefits of a garden education in San Jose

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Teaching students at Gardner Elementary School how to tend a garden had its ups and downs this year, said AmeriCorps member Annie Thomas.

The idea was simple—build seven raised garden beds, show the students how to improve the soil and plant vegetables, and educate them about where their food comes from.

Some days the children just wanted to play outside. Other days were hot. They wanted popsicles.

"I'd say, 'I can't get you popsicles, but I can get you watermelons!'" Thomas said.

Luckily, learning about food was the point.

Thomas was one of 46 participants in the new Silicon Valley Health Corps, funded by a \$1.02 million AmeriCorps grant to The Health Trust. A year ago, the program started gardens at 11 schools and community centers. The grant also funded 125 garden workshops, 113 farm and garden field trips and started 100 backyard gardens, many in San Jose's Washington and Gardner neighborhoods.

Along with Gardner, the work took place throughout schools in San Jose including Galarza Elementary School in Willow Glen and Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Elementary School near the Gardner neighborhood. This summer, teens and senior citizens from the Gardner Community Center have also come by to work in the garden.

The program is funded for three years, and the aim is to hand over the program to teachers. Thomas and others have been busy this summer assembling lesson plans in binders for the teachers.

To do all

this, the HealthCorps united 10 organizations involved in growing food and educating people about the value of local, sustainable agriculture.

Katie Smith, the HealthCorps supervisor, said the project's first year was daunting but valuable, especially for children who don't like vegetables.

"A lot of kids these days don't know where their food comes from. If they're out in the garden and have a hand in producing it, they're at least much more likely to try it," Smith said.

Back at Gardner Elementary, Thomas said planting radishes and pulling them out of the ground made some lasting impressions on students.

During the rainy winter months, Thomas taught the students in the classroom about pollination, nutrition and where food comes from. When the clouds finally cleared for stretches in February and March, she took classes from kindergarten to third grade to the garden at the edge of the campus.

They planted radishes, sunflowers, tomatoes and

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green peppers.

In the end, they harvested more than 100 radishes—chosen for their quick harvest—and the children got to pull them from the ground, wash them and take a bite. They each got to take one home.

Thomas had already been involved with Bronco Urban Gardening at Santa Clara University, and she said the project helped coordinate the efforts of groups like Veggielution in San Jose and Full Circle Farm in Sunnyvale. Sacred Heart Community Service's La Mesa Verde home garden project also was involved.

The participants celebrated the one-year anniversary of the HealthCorps at a ceremony on July 28 in the Heritage Rose Garden in Guadalupe Park near downtown San Jose. Thomas, 24, is still out there this summer at Gardner. She is weeding and building new raised beds for the new school year that starts Aug. 16. She has signed on for another year of the program.

"It been a really hard challenge," Thomas said, squinting under a worn ball cap. "But shucks, I learned so much from that."

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