

Green Living



The Agrarian Adventure

By Rachel Pastiva
Photography by Elissa Trumbull

I learned something recently that completely changed the way I think about our future. For a long time I've been fearful about whether the slow changes we are making to protect our planet have any real chance of offsetting the damage we continue to do to it. Among the plethora of books, websites, and lists of ways to "go green," it's not difficult to see that the challenge is to try to get society to unlearn what has been taught from decades of consumer culture. But then, Buckminster Fuller once said, "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete." I recently learned that a new model is being built right here in Ann Arbor -- in the classrooms of a public middle school.

The organization responsible for this new model is called The Agrarian Adventure. The model is being built at Tappan Middle School, and it comes in the form of a garden. And while the students and their families, the teachers, and the principal all have important roles in building the model, it is one that The Agrarian Adventure hopes can soon be implemented in more schools around the city.

Formed in 2004, The Agrarian Adventure is a non-profit organization whose mission is to use a holistic approach to connect K-12 students with the food they eat, by focusing on not only personal health, but community and environmental health as well. Inspired in part by Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard in Berkley, California, The Agrarian Adventure came out of a yearlong conversation and planning process throughout the 2003-2004 school year. Still an unnamed project at the time, the planning group consisted of several dedicated volunteers, Slow Food Huron Valley, Tappan's Principal Gary Court, and teachers interested in the project. Students were also instrumental in developing the organization; a core group met on a weekly basis throughout the year as part of the after-school enrichment program. According to Elissa Trumbull, a co-founding volunteer, Tappan seemed like the right school to approach with the idea. "It happened [at Tappan] because there was a very receptive administrator that was very enthusiastic [and] was willing to lend resources, like allow his teachers to be involved in actually planning this from the ground up, then in return a very receptive group of teachers and a very receptive group of parents."

A groundbreaking ceremony was conducted in the fall of 2004 to begin building the garden. Construction of the greenhouse began the following school year. The greenhouse, which is referred to as the winter garden, allows the growing season to



extend further into the school year, giving students and teachers more opportunities to utilize the garden. The students helped with every aspect of the building process, from visiting farmers for gardening tips, to hauling parts off semi-trucks for construction of the winter garden. The winter garden had its first harvest in the fall of 2007, while the main garden is entering its fourth growing season.

From giving a sixth grade math class a real life story problem to solve, to an eighth grade Latin class growing wheat for the gods they were studying, the ways in which the garden can be used are truly endless. While only a core group of teachers used the garden in the beginning, Trumbull notices more and more teachers in the garden each fall. "Some of these things, they sound crazy to people, completely unattainable. [But] if you can make what seems impossible possible, then it opens people's minds' to other possibilities." The

students have grown Bolivian potatoes to coincide with the seventh and eighth grade curriculum's focus on Central and South America, and this year the annual Three Sisters Garden will be used by an eighth grade teacher to show students what foods were available during colonial times. One of the most comprehensive uses of the garden has been by Edible



Students in The Agrarian Adventure sponsored after-school enrichment program called The Tappan Food & Garden Club participate in a year-round, weekly program developing youth food preparation, food production and leadership skills. These youth helped organize the hundreds of vegetable seedlings grown by students in more than 15 classes in windowsills throughout the school for this spring's school-wide fifth annual Earth Day seed planting celebration. A portion of the seedlings were sold as a small fundraiser to support the school garden, but most were transplanted in the school garden by students.



Schoolyard food production is made possible through a partnership between educational nonprofit, The Agrarian Adventure, and Tappan Middle School. Organic produce is the most delicious of many outcomes resulting from this collaboration.

Ecology, a project of the seventh grade ecology unit in which students grew, harvested, and ate their own salad greens and radishes.

However, using the garden for academic purposes is only part of its function. It also allows students to connect with food in a way that many of them have never considered. "You can eat that?" is the question Trumbull is most often asked when students harvest the food they planted. "The idea of vegetables-- that we, as people, depend on plants to live, that doesn't make sense because food comes from the grocery store. So to be outside and to see a plant and then to be able to eat it is something that doesn't make sense for many kids." After harvesting, the students often have the opportunity to prepare and eat the food they've grown. The Agrarian Adventure's yearly goal is to set aside 20% of the harvest to donate to Food Gatherers, which makes the students proud. The Agrarian Adventure also sponsors two events a year, the Spring Festival and the School Garden Harvest Dinner, giving students the opportunity to prepare the food and share it with a larger community. It hosts an after school enrichment program and leads community volunteer efforts to maintain the school garden during the summer months.

As the garden gains more interest among the teachers, students, and families at Tappan Middle School, The Agrarian Adventure gains more support and confidence to focus on bigger goals and expand its partnerships. One major goal is to provide students with more access to fresh and nutritious food, so it is working on creating opportunities that will allow the students to consume the garden-grown food during the school day. The organization is actively collaborating with the school district, the food service provider, and other partners on a local farm-to-school program that has brought local farm-fresh food into



Students grew and harvested fresh lettuce in The Agrarian Adventure's school greenhouse (the "winter garden") at Tappan Middle School in late November 2007. As with every harvest, a portion of the garden harvest is set aside to donate as part of the Plant-a-Row-for-the-Hungry campaign and over 10 pounds of local, organic, student-grown lettuce was donated to Food Gatherers on this winter day!

Ann Arbor Public School cafeterias. The next step will be incorporating the school's own garden-grown food into the cafeteria. The Agrarian Adventure is currently working on growing its partnerships, and encourages interested students, teachers and parents in area schools to contact them to help begin conversations on bringing gardens to their schools. In order to continue on its path to success, it also requires and greatly appreciates people who are willing to donate their time, tools, expertise, and teaching skills needed to help educate the students. Monetary donations, which are tax deductible, are also necessary to help sustain and grow their work, and can be made by visiting their website.

Before finding The Agrarian Adventure, I wondered if we would stop using plastic bags fast enough, start riding bikes soon enough, or completely eliminate any of our destructive habits to make any real impact on our planet. The unlearning process is a slow one, but I never considered how quick the learning process could go. The Agrarian Adventure is empowering our children to make educated choices about their health, their community and their future. These children will inherit the earth. I learned that they will also be the ones who will save it.

For more information about The Agrarian Adventure, to learn about volunteer opportunities, or to make a donation, please visit www.agrarianadventure.org.