

Curriculum Guide for *Sylvia's Spinach*



Classroom Guide based on the Common Core Standards for *Sylvia's Spinach*

Written by Katherine Pryor and illustrated by Anna Raff

READERS to EATERS Books

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Grades K to 2

Theme

Gardening, Plant life, Life cycles, Cooking, Food tasting, Nutrition, School gardens, School Life, Classroom science projects, Trying new things

Synopsis

Sylvia Spivens hates spinach. “No spinach in my egg! No spinach in my soup! No spinach! Ever!” Then at school Sylvia’s teacher gives her a packet of spinach seeds to plant for a school garden. What to do? Overcoming her reluctance and enduring a long wait, Sylvia discovers the joy of growing food from the ground up and finds the pleasure of tasting something new.

The unlined brushwork illustrations clearly convey Sylvia’s attitude at every step of the way and give the book a light and airy appearance.

Background

While advocating for Farm to School funding in Washington State, the author, Katherine Pryor, was impressed by the array of stories told by parents, teachers, and school administrators about how having farm to school programs and school gardens had changed kids' eating practices. She decided to write this story from a child’s perspective, hoping to inspire schools and government agencies to support good food education, as well as hoping to encourage kids to taste and eat vegetables.

With an increase in childhood obesity, there has been a renewed emphasis on nutrition programs aimed at children. Research has shown that after growing vegetables in school gardens students are much more willing to try new vegetables, and their consumption of and preference for fruits and vegetables increase.

If you want to start a school garden, *How to Grow a School Garden* by Arden Bucklin-Sporer and Rachel Pringle is a great resource. There are also web resources to help you get started listed at the end of this guide.

You don’t need a large school garden to grow plants with children. You can grow food plants in pots on a windowsill or patio, for instance. All you need to grow plants is sun, soil, and water. Remember that

different plants like different amounts of sun and water. Tomatoes, for example, like lots of sun and warmth, while spinach likes cooler temperatures and less sun. Observing different plants growing next to each other with the same conditions can be a lesson for kids in itself. Which plants thrive and which do poorly?

There are many other great children’s books about gardening, including *The Tiny Seed* by Eric Carle, *The Ugly Vegetables* by Grace Lin, *Growing Vegetable Soup* by Lois Ehlert, and *Our School Garden!* by Rick Swann.

There are lots of information books about gardening, too, including the biography *Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table* by Jacqueline Briggs Martin, *The Vegetables We Eat* by Gail Gibbons, and *Roots, Shoots, Buckets & Boots* and *Sunflower Houses* by Sharon Lovejoy.

Before Reading

Reading Standards: Craft and Structure 5; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7; Key Ideas and Details 1

In introducing the book to students, you may wish to use some of the following suggestions.

1. Look at the cover and share the title with students. Is this an information book or fiction? Why do they think so?
2. Page through the book showing the illustrations without reading the text. Are there clues to any of the who, what, where, when, why, and how questions for the book that students think they can answer just from seeing the pictures in the book? What details support their answers?
3. Ask students what a vegetable is. Ask students what their favorite vegetable is. Why? What vegetables don’t they like? Why?
4. Ask students if they have they ever had to do a school project that, at first, they didn’t want to. How did it turn out in the end?
5. Have they ever had to taste a food that they didn’t want to? Did tasting it change their minds about the food?

Vocabulary

Language Standards: Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4,5,6

Review the words below and have students note how these words are used in the book. Most they will know, but they might be unfamiliar with the spelling or its meaning in the context of the story (shoots, for example). If they don’t know the word, can they infer the meaning from the context? If they know the word, can they think of a synonym for it?

CONTENT SPECIFIC

spinach	lasagna	squash	radishes
vegetable	sprout	slugs	shoots

ACADEMIC

sighed	drizzly	packet	layer
sprinkled	muttered	checked	wavy
bunches	scrumptious	except	nibbled
munched	sniffed	toward	tippiest

Homonyms are words that are spelled the same and sound the same, but have different meanings. “Shoots” is an example of this. What are the different meanings of the other words in the book that are homonyms?

slugs

squash

checked

plants

Adjectives are words that describe nouns: small is an example of an adjective. There are two special kinds of adjectives that appear in this book: comparative and superlative adjectives. When two things or people are compared to each other, you either add an “er” to the end of the adjective or, if the word is a longer one, you use “more” in front of it: smaller is an example. Sometimes you want to compare a person or thing to every other member of its group. Then you add an “est” to the end of the adjective or use “most” in front of it, like smallest or most unusual. If the adjective ends in “y,” you change it to an “i” before adding the new ending (happier).

In *Sylvia’s Spinach*, the author uses many comparative and superlative adjectives besides smaller and smallest. Look through the story and pick them out. If the example is a comparative adjective, can you name the superlative? If the example you find is a superlative, can you name the comparative form?

Then go through the book and pick out some other adjectives. How do they help you visualize the story?

After Reading

Reading Standards: Key Ideas and Details 1,2,3; Craft and Structure 4,5,6; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7,9

Discussion Questions

1. Is this book fiction or an information book? Why do you think that?
2. How does Sylvia’s attitude about spinach change during the story? Why does it change? What details did the author put in the story to help you answer this question?
3. What details did the illustrator put in the story that show that Sylvia’s attitude about spinach has changed?
4. Do you think that Sylvia’s attitude about spinach would have been different if her seeds were the first to sprout instead of the last to sprout?
5. What are facts about growing vegetables that you learned reading this book? What kind of seeds do you think you would like to plant if you had a school garden?
6. Are you interested in tasting spinach after reading this story?

Follow-up Activities

1. Also read *The Tiny Seed* by Eric Carle or *The Vegetables We Eat* by Gail Gibbons to students and discuss it with them. How is it similar to *Sylvia’s Spinach*? How is it different? What is the theme of each? *Reading Standards: Key Ideas and Details 1,2; Craft and Structure 5*
2. Count the number of seeds in a packet of seeds from the store. Count by 2s and 3s. Develop word problems using the seeds for addition and subtraction. *Math Content: Operations and Algebraic Thinking 1,2,5*
3. Have students draw a sequence of the stages that Sylvia’s spinach plant went through from seed to table. Label the drawings. *Language Arts: Text Types and Purposes 2,3; Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7*
4. Have students write about an experience where they had to try something new that they didn’t, at least initially, want to do. Have students describe their feelings going into the experience and

report on what they did and how their feelings changed by doing this. *Language Arts: Text Types and Purposes 3*

5. Plant seeds in a cup or pot of dirt, and water on a regular basis. Observe daily and write down any observations. When the seeds sprout, measure the plants' growth over a period of a couple of weeks and record that as well, either with pictures or in writing. When the plants are large enough, try replanting them outside and see what happens! *Language Arts: Text Types and Purposes 3; Mathematics: Measurement and Data 2*

Web Resources

If you are interested in starting a school garden or learning more about them, these websites are invaluable:

The School Garden Wizard (<http://www.schoolgardenwizard.org>) was created for America's K-12 school community through a partnership between the United States Botanic Garden and the Chicago Botanic Garden. It covers every step involved in making the case for, creating, using, maintaining, and evaluating a school garden.

The National Gardening Association maintains a website rich with ideas for gardening with children: <http://www.kidsgardening.org>. This site also maintains a national registry of school gardens as well as sells kits, tools, and books that support a gardening curriculum.

California has emphasized school garden programs for a number of years. The California School Garden Network's comprehensive website can be found at <http://www.csgn.org>.

Life Lab (<http://www.lifelab.org>) is a California-based organization that offers a number of environmental, hands-on, science- and garden-based programs. *The Growing Classroom—Garden and Nutrition Activity Guide* is one of the best garden-based curriculum guides available. Their website is full of useful ideas on all aspects of school gardening.

Author & Illustrator Information

Katherine Pryor loves eating spinach sautéed, stir-fried, steamed, or straight from the garden. In addition to writing, Katherine manages a program to bring local and healthy food to Washington State hospitals. She is co-founder of South Park Fresh Starts, which grows vegetable starts for a food bank in Seattle. This is her first children's book. Learn more about Katherine at katherinepryor.com.

Anna Raff loves spinach, sweet potatoes, and bananas but steers clear of liver and sea urchins. Her illustrations have appeared in many publications, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, KIWI Magazine, and American Illustration. She lives in New York City. Learn more about Anna at annaraff.com.

Publisher Information

Sylvia's Spinach is published by READERS to EATERS, whose mission is to promote food literacy. READERS to EATERS produces books that celebrate the pleasure of food, the joy of eating together, and the wonder of seeing our nourishment grow from the ground. They can be found on the web at readerstoeters.com.