



TOPIC COVERED: LOCAL PROCUREMENT

Rebuilding a School Garden through the Resiliency of Community

Through consistent dedication and collaborations between school staff members and CalFresh Healthy Living, UC Cooperative Extension (CFHL, UCCE), Liberty Elementary School in Santa Maria was able to reestablish their school garden that had lain dormant since the COVID-19 school closures. Established in 2018, Liberty Elementary School's garden was so productive at its peak that the cafeteria manager, Pam Stokes, used garden produce for special dishes and several tastings. From 2018 to 2020, Stokes worked closely with CFHL, UCCE team members Miguel Diaz, Nutrition Educator, and Abbi Marrs, Regional Garden Coordinator, to bring produce from the garden into the cafeteria. For example, Stokes used the excess garden kale to make kale chips for the students. Liberty Elementary School's principal, Cynthia Duncan, was also instrumental in working with Marrs, Diaz, Stokes, and several teachers to create a school culture that deeply valued the garden and local procurement. This robust relationship developed over time and was supported by many teachers who conducted garden tastings and food and nutrition education in their classrooms. The garden was at the heart of their elementary school.

As a result of the COVID-19 school closures, Liberty Elementary School's garden fell dormant. While the garden was not cultivated during this period, the importance of the garden remained embedded in the school culture—and the staff and students never gave up hope. In 2023, Marrs, Diaz, Stokes, Duncan, and several teachers utilized the power and dedication of their community to revitalize their school garden. Duncan leveraged her role as principal to lobby the school district to provide financial support for the garden, Diaz worked with students on their public speaking skills and encouraged their participation in school board meetings, and the teachers showed support and enthusiasm for incorporating garden-based learning into their curriculum. Their efforts were a success and the newly rebuilt garden was ready for the 2024–2025 school year.



From left to right: Miguel Diaz, Nutrition Educator; Catherine Soto, third grade teacher; Abbi Marrs, Regional Garden Coordinator; and Cynthia Duncan, school principal at the Liberty Elementary School garden.

As of June 2025, CFHL, UCCE and Liberty Elementary School's staff continue to work collaboratively to create a productive school garden. While it is always a work in progress, it is close to its pre-pandemic abundance again. As Diaz, Marrs, Stokes, and Duncan work towards their shared goals, they note that reestablishing the garden has taken time and determination, with the entire revitalization process lasting close to three years. In the first year, Diaz and Marrs fixed the soil and created a plan; in the second year, they planted the garden; and in the third year, they began to see the garden flourish. Moving forward, Diaz and Marrs plan to use garden produce in their cafeteria once again. In the meantime, Diaz and the Liberty Elementary School teachers engage students in nutrition and garden-based activities. Diaz and Marrs work with the Student Nutrition Advisory Council (SNAC) once a week and teachers embed garden education into every grade level at Liberty Elementary School.

LESSONS LEARNED

When gardens are embedded into a school's culture, it increases their resilience and sustainability when facing unforeseen challenges. Even after experiencing years of dormancy, a school community's dedication and hard work have the potential to bring school gardens back into a productive and flourishing space.



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TOPIC COVERED: FOOD WASTE

Reducing Food Waste by Partnering with UC Master Food Preservers

Debbie George, University of California Master Food Preserver (UC MFP) volunteer, and Abbi Marrs, CalFresh Healthy Living, UC Cooperative Extension (CFHL, UCCE) Regional Garden Coordinator, have created a unique collaboration to enhance garden education and decrease wasted garden produce at Hapgood Elementary School. The UC MFP Program is facilitated by UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (UC SAREP), and is administered by local UCCE county offices. UC MFP volunteers take extensive classes related to food safety and food preservation and use this knowledge to offer education to the public. While UC MFPs do not usually work at school sites, George and Marrs connected in 2022 after George visited Hapgood Elementary School's robust school garden. George had expressed interest in working with students and was impressed by the garden, orchard, and dedication to farm to cafeteria programming. Given the abundance of Hapgood Elementary School's garden, there were ample opportunities to use their produce in creative ways. For example, when they had too much lettuce from their hydroponic towers, Jan Crouse-Tell, Child Nutrition Specialist at Lompoc Unified School District (LUSD), coordinated efforts to offer lettuce to other school sites. Through their collaboration, Marrs and George developed new food preservation projects that utilized excess garden produce, reducing waste and enhancing garden education.

This collaboration began with food preservation activities twice a week with the fifth and sixth-grade student leaders. Due to the success of the initial activities, UCCE and UC MFP formed an agreement to formalize the relationship. George has remained the champion volunteer at Hapgood Elementary School, implementing food preservation projects using produce from the flourishing garden and orchard. George plans food preservation classes for each month of the school year where students learn to make spinach pesto, applesauce, apple juice, peach salsa, kimchi, freezer strawberry jam, persimmon jam, and veggie pickles using carrots, zucchini, and cauliflower. Each lesson includes food safety and handling practices and utilizes UC MFP recipe cards and instructions. All recipes used are also Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) approved. The program takes place after school and is completely volunteer-led. In addition to teaching students essential skills, these workshops reduce the waste of the garden-grown produce and teach students relevant tips for reducing food waste at home.

Coordination and communication were crucial to the development of the program, and George and Marrs quickly learned that protocols and agreements were needed to ensure smooth logistics. The protocols helped ensure that the project utilized approved recipes from SNAP-Ed, had clear volunteer guidelines, and directly established which entity purchased the necessary ingredients and equipment for each activity. According to Marrs, the first year of the collaboration was spent building the connection,

the second year was a trial period where they conducted classes monthly with nearly 60 student leaders, and by the third year, they had a strong program in place.



Hapgood Elementary School Garden

In addition to Marris and George, Crouse-Tell and the Hapgood Elementary School teachers play essential roles in this collaboration. Crouse-Tell provides storage space, a refrigerator, and an area to clean the produce in the school kitchen and the cafeteria. Ana Uribe, a teacher at Hapgood Elementary School, runs the student leader program and helps to organize all leadership events. Marris suggests that other school sites can replicate this program regardless of the state of their garden. By reaching out to a staff lead at UC Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR), other school sites may be surprised at the resources available. Marris notes that guidelines and formalized protocols for volunteers are helpful for long-term success.

LESSONS LEARNED

Partnering with volunteers through the UC Master Food Preservers Program can expand garden programming focused on food waste, offering hands-on educational opportunities for students to learn fun and delicious ways to make the most of garden produce.