

Clairemont Cluster Sage Garden Project

By Jon Lewis

Who knew what was to come, back in early 2018, when MG Karen Saake came to a School Garden Committee meeting and announced that the Sage Garden Project had some extra funds? I said “Oh, heck, yeah, I’ll take your money!” I wrote a two-page Letter of Inquiry, requesting an unspecified amount of funding for five of the Clairemont neighborhood schools I was already working with. Mere days later, Sage notified me that the schools were being awarded \$25,000! I said “Great! What am I supposed to do with the money?!” They told me that we should get the schools’ gardens ready to teach gardening classes and then start teaching!

I contacted Judy Petix Anderson, the mom leading the after-school garden club at Lafayette Elementary, and asked her if she was interested in assisting. Judy gladly ran with the challenge, and we piloted the program that Spring semester at Lafayette, Field, Whitman, Toler, and Hawthorne Elementary Schools. Starting out, some of the schools had fallow gardens, and one of them had no garden at all! Parents, teachers and community volunteers took quick action to build new garden beds, haul soil and compost, install irrigation, pull weeds, and plant tomatoes.

Our first full year of funding was the 2019-2020 school year, and we gathered a core group of school moms, neighbors, and local garden educators to provide Sage lessons to all five of our schools. The Sprouts Healthy Communities Foundation has been a major partner with Sage and our schools, providing each school with a fully equipped cooking cart and gift cards to purchase produce for the cooking lessons. Master Gardeners supported implementation of the gardening program with several mini-grants to all five schools that first year, for the purchase of raised bed materials, irrigation supplies, plants, kid-size watering cans, and other essentials. We also received a truckload of raised bed soil from Kellogg, which was shared among the schools.

The Sage Garden Project staff was really impressed with the Clairemont Consortium’s model of sharing resources among our schools and having the connections that enabled the educators to cover each other’s’ classes due to illness and other emergencies. In the 2020-2021 school year, they adopted our model for all of their schools and formed regional groups with leader positions to oversee regional operations. We added two more schools to our Consortium that year, Chesterton and Hancock, and added even more educators.

Faced with pandemic school shutdowns in March of 2020, Judy and her crew began teaching remotely from Lafayette Elementary, whose principal gave them full access to the school garden and to a classroom. Students stuck at home were happy to have Farmer Judy, Farmer Brian and Chef Brendan provide videos straight from the Lafayette garden and cooking classroom each week to supplement their remote classroom lessons. Other garden educators taught from their home gardens via Zoom and YouTube.

We celebrated the end of the first semester of the shutdown with a Zoom for all of the schools in the consortium. The educators put together take-home bags of soup ingredients, including beans, fresh celery, onions, and seasonings, plus a handout in English and Spanish with the recipe and the Zoom link, and distributed them to more than 300 student families. On the last Thursday evening before the end of the school year, Chef Brendan led a Zoom demonstration on preparing the soup, with more than 175 families, teachers, principals, and Sage staffers in virtual attendance. In a number of the student families on camera, we could see younger and older siblings, moms and dads on screen as well. Some of them set up their phones or iPads on the back of the stove, so we witnessed their participation through a cloud of steam!!

Before the current school year, Sage asked us if we would be willing to recruit all the Clairemont elementary schools for a project to evaluate student outcomes of participation in Sage Garden Project lessons. Sage staff worked with San Diego Unified School District and an Independent Review Board to normalize the evaluation and identify control schools. To implement this project, we added the seven remaining Clairemont public elementary schools last Spring, attending Zoom PTA meetings, promoting the program to the principals, and assisting them with their first applications. Once they were all on board, Judey and I started recruiting more educators. With the help of Janelle Manzano, Master Gardeners, Facebook and word of mouth, we were able to recruit enough people to cover all our schools. These folks attended the three day Sage training last July, and we were off running.

Acknowledging that managing the evaluation and juggling activities for 15 schools was a huge task, Sage has hired the amazing Emalyn Leppard, veteran garden educator, to coordinate the local program. Among other activities, Emalyn has strengthened our relationship with Janelle and her district-level Farm to School program. Janelle delivers extra Harvest of the Month produce to our schools, and students are able to taste the monthly selections during garden and cooking classes as a result, in addition to lunchtime. Emalyn is currently helping the schools to establish garden committees and working on recruiting more parents to help with the in-class activities as schools reopen. We just finished submitting our reapplications for the 2022-2023 school year in February and are looking forward to settling down to what we hope will be a more peaceful teaching environment next Fall.

The expanded program has been supported by several additional Master Gardener grants to individual schools, as well as grants from the Village Garden Club of La Jolla, Big Green Schoolyards, San Diego Ag in the Classroom, and several other agencies. We have recruited local Eagle Scouts to build four compost bins, an outdoor sink, numerous raised beds, and install new irrigation systems. In January, 20 local Sprouts employees helped clean up a neglected garden space at one school for their national day of service.

The most amazing outcomes that we've observed over the past several years are students who are eager for outdoor learning; eager to get their hands dirty; who want to taste something that they planted themselves; and who love to chop celery and then eat

it! Students who know where their food comes from; who go home and tell their parents about healthy food choices; and who help their parents prepare healthy meals for their families. Students who go back to class and want to talk about an insect that they just saw; and who know how the environment affects plant growth!

Here are two of my own favorite school garden stories. The first was when a kindergartener asked me how plants make their own food! I tried to give him a quick overview of photosynthesis for five year olds. He seemed happy. The next week, he didn't remember asking the question!

The second was when a second grader asked me if he could have the giant, overgrown radish I had just pulled out of the ground. I handed it to him, dirt and all, and didn't give it another thought. Five minutes later, he handed the leaves back to me. He had dirt smeared on his face and was still chomping away! YUM!