

# STUDENTS DIG



for REAL School Gardens



BY LACEY REEVES AND N. SUSAN EMEAGWALI

**T**here's a lot of talk about saving the environment and going green these days. But the challenge is to turn the words into action, and that includes getting young students to become part of the discussion about sustainability. The Texas-based REAL School Gardens program provides opportunities for students to participate in service-learning as they build sustainable gardens in their communities. Elementary students design, install and sustain urban gardens which serve as outdoor classrooms for students to learn some very important lessons about community, family, nature and sustainability.

The Rainwater Environmental Alliance for Learning (REAL) serves more than 40,000 children and 2,300 educators in 66 North Texas schools, and close to 15,000 students and teachers through the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance. REAL School Gardens notes on its Web site that its mission is to "create safe outdoor spaces to engage young children to use nature to enhance student learning, encourage family and community involvement in schools, and to create vibrant, sharing networks of educators and partners who commit to putting school gardens at the heart of urban neighborhoods."

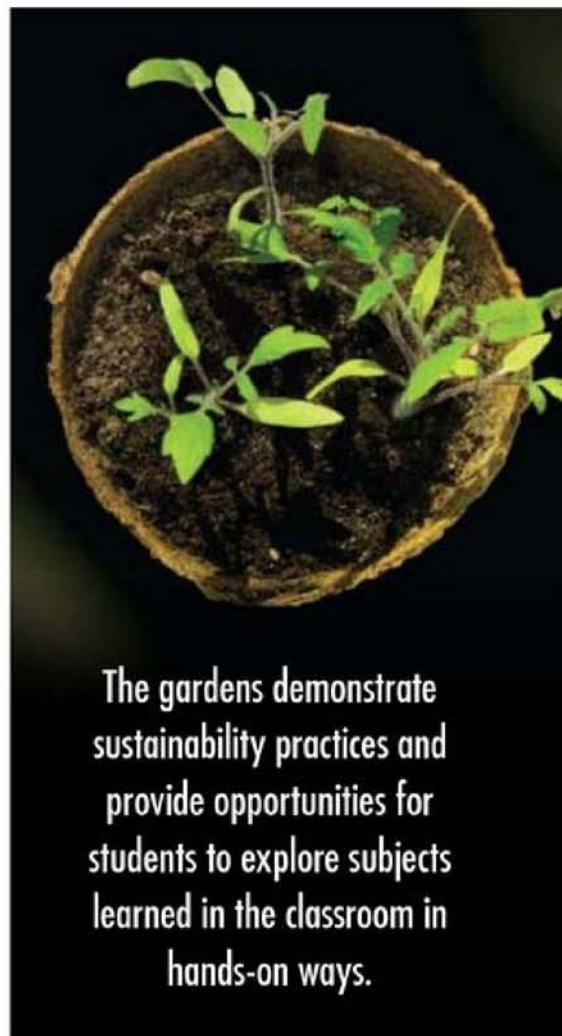
The gardens demonstrate sustainability practices and provide opportunities for students to explore subjects learned in the classroom in hands-on ways. For instance, teacher and avid birder Kristene Gillmer used a bird study to incorporate science and writing for her first-graders. Her pupils at the Alice Carlson Applied Learning Center in Fort Worth, Texas, each picked a bird that they would study, documenting the bird's eating patterns, the number of eggs they laid, and how

and when they migrated. Then they turned their crayon sketches into computerized illustrations, thanks to computer software, complete with detailed information about the birds. The complete guide was showcased at the school's annual garden celebration. Not only were the students enthusiastic about doing the work, they were learning information that they would not soon forget because of the exciting way they learned it.

In another project, thanks to an Innovation Generation grant provided by the Motorola Foundation, hundreds of students are not just learning about alternative energy, they are creating it. These students, along with instructors and local experts, are exploring new ways to power school garden water pumps with wind and solar energy.

### Helping Students to Connect

Scott Feille, a REAL School Gardens regional program director, has witnessed the positive psychosocial effects the garden projects often have on children. According to Feille, one such incident involved a fifth-grade student named George. George was a new student who had been held back a year. Bigger than his contemporaries and a bit intimidating, George's classmates were afraid of him. He was disrespectful to teachers and his behavior eventually escalated to the point that he was suspended from school. Feille decided to try a new tactic with George to see if it would make a difference. He invited George to join fellow classmates to work on a compost gardening project. Feille envisioned that perhaps a new learning venue would bring about a change in George's attitude and help his peers see him in a new light. While working on the project, it was observed



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that peer-to-peer comfort levels improved dramatically. George was assigned the duty of monitoring the compost and was allowed to choose one classmate each day to assist him. This responsibility not only provided opportunities for George to become better acquainted with his peers, it also spurred a significant improvement in his academic performance. Feille can't help but wonder what would have become of George without that pivotal turning point he achieved by participation in the program.





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### Service-Learning Projects Strengthen the Community

Service-learning projects are proving to be a great way to strengthen community ties to local elementary schools. One collaborative effort was initiated by Keith Whitworth, a sociology professor at Texas Christian University (TCU), who teaches an undergraduate course on sustainability. As part of a class assignment, his students worked with REAL School Gardens' students on sustainability projects so that they are able to see firsthand the

difference that preserving the environment can really make.

David Aftandalian, a professor who teaches an undergraduate class on U.S. food systems and security at TCU, had a group work with five REAL schools to provide vegetables for refugees through the Refugee Services of Texas. "We are hoping that a new crop of students will continue this project and set up a stable system for production and distribution between schools and Refugee Services," he said. This project has given the university

students an opportunity to find positive solutions to many of the challenges they learn about in their coursework. It also provides them an opportunity to be teachers; they get to share their new knowledge with the students at the elementary schools who then have an opportunity to grow produce with a purpose.

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### Helping Troubled Students

The Tarrant Co. Juvenile offenders program works to rehabilitate students by offering them exploration and learning in the gardens. Feille notes that this program has the potential to help troubled children find a purpose and work toward preventing future delinquency. The gardens provide a sense of hope for those who may get lost in the shuffle, and, oftentimes, they help people discover their hidden talents and potential. Children in schools today face many challenges that perhaps prior generations did not; having an outlet such as these gardens can help prevent students from engaging in risky behavior because they have a positive place where they can devote their time and energy during school hours, as well as after school. Not to mention, helping children develop a



love and appreciation for nature ensures that future generations will be more environmentally conscious.

### Helping Students develop Healthy Eating Habits

The gardens have also demonstrated the ability to teach children about making healthy eating choices. With the obesity rates constantly on the rise, teaching people at a young age to love fruits and vegetables is vital to ensuring the health of the population. Many students at the schools may not always find proper nutrition in the home for a variety of reasons, and having access to fresh fruits and vegetables can serve as a supplement for those students.

### A Winning Strategy

REAL School Gardens is successful in engaging children and providing educators with a powerful teaching tool. Communities are becoming actively engaged with their local schools, and strong relationships are fostered as a result. REAL School Gardens is successfully proving that gardens can foster a love of nature and an understanding of sustainability, build communities and promote hands-on learning. To find out more about REAL School Gardens, visit [www.realschoolgardens.org](http://www.realschoolgardens.org). 

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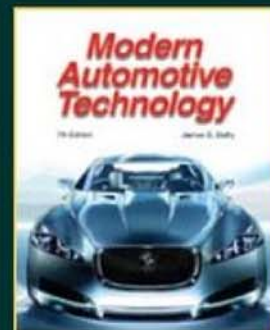
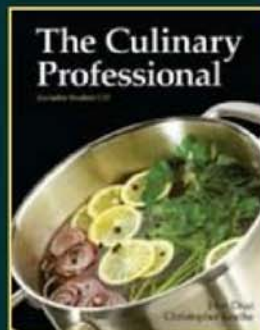
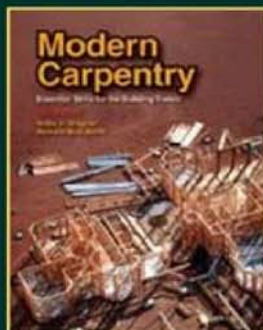
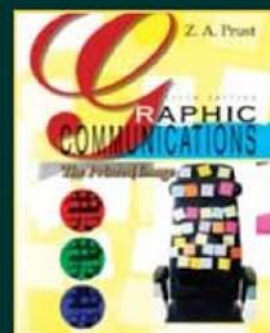
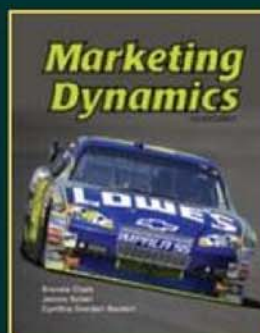
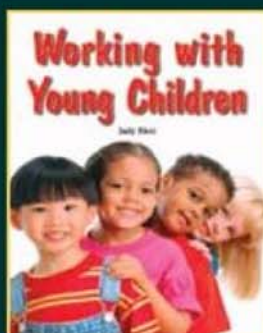
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