

# Give Peas a Chance!

## Spreading Food Literacy One Book at a Time

MOLLY SENECHAL



Sylvia Spivens hates spinach. Her parents try coaxing her to sample some. They extol the green leafy vegetable's nutritional benefits. But she just won't eat it.

Then Sylvia is assigned to sow spinach seeds for her school's garden. Grow the vegetable she detests? No way! She tries trading seeds with her classmates. No luck: Sylvia is stuck. After planting, watering, and waiting (and waiting, and WAITING), Sylvia finally sees the spinach poking out of the soil. She waits some more, nibbles a leaf and—guess what?—she **LIKES** it!

Score one for growing your own food!

Now, you've probably guessed that Sylvia Spivens isn't an actual person. And you're right. She is the titular character of the children's picture book *Sylvia's Spinach* by Katherine Pryor and published by the Bellevue, Washington, publishing house Readers to Eaters. And she can inspire folks who want to grow their own food, give vegetables a second chance, or increase their food literacy in general.

Just what is food literacy? That depends on whom you ask. The Food Literacy Center ([www.foodliteracycenter.org](http://www.foodliteracycenter.org)) describes it as “understanding the impact of your food choices on your health, the environment, and our community.”<sup>1</sup> Food literacy ([www.food-literacy.org](http://www.food-literacy.org)) defines it as “the ability to organise one's everyday nutrition in a self-determined, responsible, and enjoyable way.”<sup>2</sup>

Philip Lee, cofounder and coowner of Readers to Eaters, has a simpler definition.

“Food literacy is knowing what and how we eat,” he said.

The “what” is pretty straightforward (food labels come immediately to mind), but the “how” is more complex. Is cooking dinner a family affair? Do you eat in front of a TV or at a dining table? And how do you know when your stomach is really full? These are the questions Lee and Readers to Eaters aim to address in a nonjudgmental way.

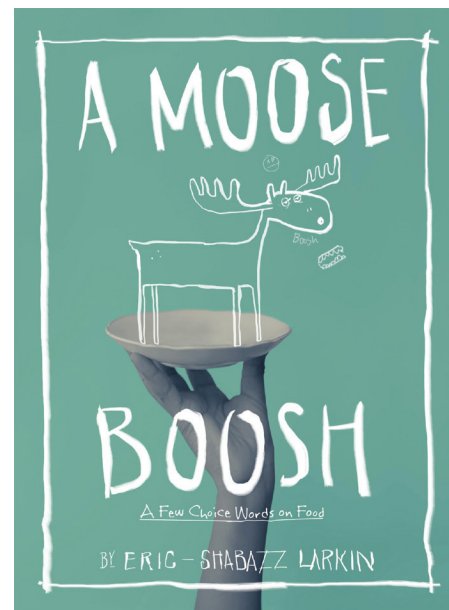
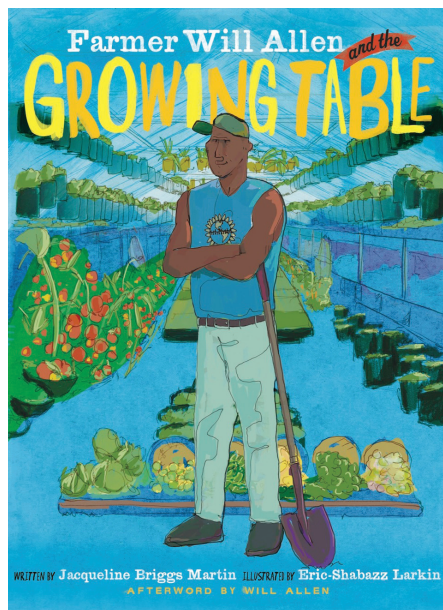
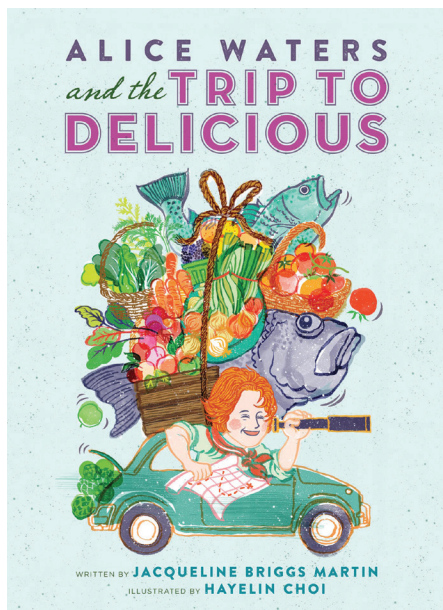
“Our goal is not just to build a healthy food community, but to build a healthy community through food,” Lee said.

Lee and his wife, June Jo Lee, founded Readers to Eaters in 2009 with the mission to “promote food literacy from the ground up.”<sup>3</sup> The company publishes books with a fun, fresh take

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on—as Lee said—what and how we eat. Good stories, beautiful writing, and an appreciation for food cultures are key.

Readers to Eaters' offerings are as diverse as the school and community gardens depicted in the books. The Lees publish everything from biographies (*Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table*, *Alice Waters and the Trip to Delicious*) to picture books (*Sylvia's Spinach*, *Our School Garden!*) to poetry (*A Moose Boosh: A Few Choice Words about Food*). The books tackle silly and serious topics alike.

Silly, you ask? Check out this poem from *A Moose Boosh* by Eric Shabazz Larkin:

If I Had My Own Cooking Show  
 If I had my own cooking show,  
 oh, the things I'd make ...  
 spider noodles with ant balls  
 and baked mud cakes.  
 If I had my own cooking show,  
 I'd wave to all the girls I know.  
 I'd make them caramel-covered frogs  
 and wrap them up with pretty bows.  
 If I had my own cooking show,  
 I'd call it "The Dilly-Dallyin' Cooking Show"  
 and I'd teach the most Dilly-Dallyin' recipes I know.  
 'Cause it's my own cooking show.<sup>4</sup>

*Mmm ... caramel-covered frogs ...*

To better understand Lee's passion for good books about good food, it helps to know a bit about his background. Lee was the cofounder and publisher of Lee & Low Books, an award-winning publishing company focused on multicultural children's literature. He also worked at Condé Nast, and later, as a host and producer for KBCS radio in Bellevue, where he reported on educational issues. It soon became clear to Lee that youth

obesity, hunger, and lack of access to good foods are enormous obstacles to learning. This knowledge led to Lee's reporting on farm-to-school, food security, and the local food movement.<sup>5</sup>

"When I started in publishing. . . I was focusing on making good books," Lee said. The knowledge that students were going without food, and good food at that, "was a wake-up call. There is a strong connection between food and learning," he added.

Making sure students have enough to eat is only part of the food literacy picture. School and library gardens offer an abundance of activities that have ties to traditional academic subjects. The most obvious of them is science (How much water does lettuce need to grow? What amount of sunlight is best for pumpkins?), but there is also math (How many tomato plants can I fit in a ten-foot-square area? Are three carrots enough for a pot of vegetable soup?), language arts (How about a poem titled "Ode to Onions"?), and even history.

Yes, history! Lee told of a group of seventh-grade students learning about the Middle East as the region was centuries ago. During the unit, they made hummus with ingredients they had grown in their school garden. Amazing, right?

Equally amazing is the role public libraries are playing in the food literacy movement. Seed exchanges, library gardens and related programs, and collections of books on urban and small space gardening are increasing people's awareness of "eating local" in a fun and informative way.

Consider the Nature Explorium, a 5,000-square-foot outdoor library garden and learning space in Centereach, New York, where young patrons and their families can taste and smell flowers and herbs, build boats and float them down a creek, and play musical instruments from different cultures.<sup>6</sup> Or the Dane County Seed Library in Wisconsin, from which county residents check out vegetable seeds for their own gardens and return



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Philip Lee and June Jo Lee

seeds from those plants in the fall.<sup>7</sup> Novice and expert gardeners love getting down in the dirt.

“It is so exciting to see the interest from kids,” said Sarah Tomasiewicz, children’s garden intern for the Brown County Central Library in Green Bay, Wisconsin. “Children in bigger cities don’t always have space for gardens. This is their chance.”

Tomasiewicz, who is majoring in human biology at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, worked alongside Brown County Library staff to plan and plant the garden that officially opened with a vine-cutting ceremony in the summer of 2014. They came up with event content first, plants, second. Children and their families had a hand in everything from planting seeds to weeding to watering and, in autumn, making scarecrows and planting bulbs for spring.

Who reaps the benefits of library gardens? Anyone who’s interested. At the Brown County Library, produce like fragrant basil, tender lettuce, roma tomatoes, and green peppers, is piled in a basket for everyone to enjoy.

And who doesn’t enjoy the taste of a garden-fresh tomato? Or, for that matter, spinach? 🍷

## References

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