



From left: Brown County (Wis.) Library staff Ginni Engelbrecht, Andrea Stepanik, and Sandy Kallunki share sample treats at a garden-related event. Fresh basil and tomatoes, along with strawberry basil lemonade, were highlights!

# A Bumper Crop of Ideas

## Library Gardens Offer Many Teachable Programs, Moments

Sandy Kallunki

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**T**omatoes, herbs, berries, and sunflowers are cropping up in sometimes-surprising settings in cities and suburbs across the country as advocates turn to the age-old practice of gardening as a fresh way to promote healthier diets, fight hunger and poverty, sustain environmental health, inspire a sense of community, and provide outdoor learning experiences for all ages.

For this range of reasons, many libraries are among the public places that are adding gardens. Gardens are a natural fit with the time-honored library goals of community service and education. Specifically, a garden—whether it is the size of a small farm or consists of a few pots of peppers—can provide fertile ground for the early literacy efforts that may be at the heart of your library’s mission.

Librarians can easily infuse early literacy components into garden-related activities by including read-alouds, fingerplays, action rhymes, participation songs, and other activities typical of library storytimes. Beyond that, gardens allow abundant opportunities for little ones and their significant adults to

- interact and talk to each other;
- explore with all five senses;
- learn new words (many kids don’t spend much time in gardens or nature and may not have experience with related vocabulary);
- practice motor skills and eye-hand coordination;
- increase background knowledge on many topics, including foods and nutrition;
- listen to, read, and talk about nonfiction books;
- focus on concepts such as colors, counting, and comparisons;
- learn about sequencing (such as plant life cycles) and retelling stories in order;
- lay the foundation for letter recognition through comparing shapes, using garden labels, and drawing and scribbling as part of scavenger hunt and art activities.

At the Central Branch of Brown County Library (BCL) in Green Bay, Wisconsin, staff have been developing garden-related and food literacy activities for toddlers and preschool-age kids that tie into ALSC’s Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) curriculum. These efforts stem from the Cellcom Children’s Edible Garden, which replaced the library’s concrete front plaza in the spring of 2014, as well as the library’s established role as a site where kids can get free, nutritious lunches through the Summer Lunch Program coordinated by the Green Bay Area Public Schools.

“Most of the children’s gardening and nutrition lesson plans that we find in books and online are geared for school-age students,

## Share Your Garden Know-How

Interested in sharing ideas and resources related to library gardens (not just early literacy, but anything about starting and operating library gardens and educational programs on gardening and nutrition for all ages)? We are trying to engage an ongoing online communication on this topic. Please contact Sandy Kallunki, Brown County Library, Kallunki\_sj@co.brown.wi.us, 920-448-5846.

## Take the Library Gardens Survey!

Brown County Library’s Garden & Nutrition Education Intern is working on a survey to gather information about libraries that host gardens used for educational purposes. To participate, go to [www.surveymonkey.com/s/LibraryGardenSurvey2015](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/LibraryGardenSurvey2015).

and they tend to be more appropriate for structured classes, and for situations in which you have the same kids coming week after week,” said Jessica Pyrek, children’s librarian at BCL.

“We have been stealing and adapting from a variety of sources as well as coming up with our own ideas, so we can use our garden to reinforce our early learning initiatives with preschool audiences,” she added.

As an example, Pyrek described a class the library developed to tie into its “pizza garden” bed. After a pizza-themed read-aloud, the kids work together to embellish giant pretend pizzas. For toddlers, the order is for a shapes and colors pizza. Each toddler chooses from a variety of shapes in different colors, cut out fairly large so they were easy for little hands to manipulate, with Velcro dots on the back.

The librarian asks, “If you have a red circle, add your topping to the pizza,” repeating the request with other shapes and colors. As called upon, the little ones each come up to place their shape onto an extra-large laminated, “cheese”-laden crust, dotted with mozzarella-colored Velcro. (A circular tablecloth can also be used for the crust.)

For older preschoolers, the same process is followed but using cut-out images of vegetables—some common, some less familiar, such as artichokes. Kids learn the names of the foods portrayed and sound out the onset letter—“If you have a topping that starts with the letter (sound) B, please add it to the pizza,” etc.

Kids can also cut and glue toppings onto their own pretend pizzas to take home, using cardboard pizza circles donated by a local store.

Out in the pizza garden with their parents, the kids use child-size safety scissors and large spoons to harvest tomatoes,



Brown County Library holds many spring/summer events at its "edible garden."

peppers, basil, and oregano and to dig up onions. The produce is washed, and volunteers cut it into small pieces for tasting.

Brown County Library staff have also developed a Rainbow Garden program for preschoolers and their parents. It starts with reading a story aloud about different color fruits and vegetables (such as *White Is for Blueberry* by George Shannon). Then we show PowerPoint slides of bright, clear photos of fruits and vegetables of different colors. The kids participate in a rhyming movement song to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know It": "If you're wearing lemon yellow, shake like Jell-o," etc. An additional PowerPoint slide is briefly shown to illustrate the key nutritional recommendation to eat lots of fruits and vegetables of all different colors.

A Rainbow Scavenger Hunt takes kids out into the garden to fill out a sheet printed with all the colors of the rainbow. Kids are challenged to find plants and hidden parts of plants that match each color. Parents help the little ones name the plants (they can point to and read the plant markers). Space is included on the sheet for kids to draw what they find, to put an X if they've eaten that plant before, and to circle a face (smile, neutral, frown) to indicate if they liked the taste.

For an indoor alternative, library staff put out a variety of books with pictures of plants, and the kids search through them to find as many as they can of each color. Staff also purchased several twelve-packs of Mr. Sketch scented markers and created a coloring book with food pictures that matched the color and scent of each marker (except the confusing turquoise marker which is supposed to be mango).

Abbe Klebanoff started a garden at the Lansdowne (Pa.) Public Library two years ago, and she now works for the Free Library of Philadelphia, where she hopes to start another garden at a branch library. "At Lansdowne, we raised red wiggler worms and harvested the compost to use in the garden," Klebanoff said. "The worm bin was brought out after various STEM story times. Kids love worms!" The children counted the worms and the eggs each week and increased vocabulary by learning worm anatomy such as segments and gizzards, she explained.

The kids and their parents also conducted a simple experiment with compost and seeds: Each child placed dirt and planted herb seeds inside two toilet paper cores. Worm compost was added to one of the cores. Then they took the planted seeds home to water and grow, observing that the seeds with the compost sprouted first.

One of Klebanoff's favorite garden read-alouds is *Up, Down, and Around* by Katherine Ayres, which Klebanoff said, "illustrates the concept of not just growing vegetables but the directions in which different vegetables grow."

Her former coworker at Lansdowne Public Library, Rachee Fagg, head of Children's Services, described a program about fruit and the five senses, which was attended by children up to age three and a half. Parents interacted with little ones at stations, including a touch station (a variety of seeds), a smell station (bags with cotton balls moistened with vanilla, lemon, vinegar, coffee, etc.), a listen station (storytime, creating egg shakers with rice), and a taste station (garden herbs including three different kinds of basil to compare).

With parent supervision, the kids could also make and take home a "look-and-find" toy. They filled single-serving plastic juice

containers (labels removed) with rice and mixed in other small objects, which could include different seeds, small stones, or other objects from the garden. Once sealed, the child could turn the bottle around and look to find everything hidden in the rice.

Arlington (Va.) Public Library is known for its large Plot Against Hunger vegetable garden at its Central Library. At its Westover Branch, youth services librarian/assistant branch manager Anne Brooks, who is also a master gardener, has smaller garden beds that she uses for educational purposes with children. She has mostly focused on ages five through nine, but she is also looking for more ideas to connect gardening and early literacy. "We've done square-foot gardening, and I plan to start a butterfly garden," she said. "We've also stuck painters tape on the table to divide it into sections so the kids could sort leaves and other objects by size or color." 🌱

## A Growing List: Garden Books and Ideas

Here is a list of additional books and ways to use gardens to help kids under age six develop broader early learning/preliteracy skills. Hold storytime right in your garden! Plant seeds or harvest produce afterward.

Aliki. *Quiet in the Garden*. Greenwillow, 2009, unpagged. Can you sit still and quiet in the garden? What do you hear and see?

Amstutz, Lisa J. *Which Seed Is This?* Capstone, 2012, unpagged. Create a flannel board matching game: match seed image to images of the plant or food it grows into. Or create a similar guessing game with a PowerPoint.

Ayres, Katherine. *Up, Down, and Around*. Illus. by Nadine Bernard Westcott. Candlewick, 2007, unpagged. After this upbeat, rhyming introduction to gardens, categorize your plants by whether they grow up, down, or around.

Barry, Frances. *Big Yellow Sunflower*. Candlewick, 2008, unpagged. This book, which explains the life cycle of the plant, opens up into a giant sunflower.

Bass, Jennifer Vogel. *Edible Colors*. Roaring Brook, 2014, unpagged.

Beaton, Clare. *Clare Beaton's Garden Rhymes*. Barefoot, 2014, unpagged. This small board book offers ideas for garden-related nursery rhymes you can share, clap to the beat, and help kids memorize.

Berkes, Marianne. *What's in the Garden?* Illus. by Cris Arbo. Dawn Publishing, 2013, unpagged. Rhyming riddles invite kids to guess the fruit or vegetable. The book includes tips for adults on activities to extend the story for kids.

Brown, Ken. *The Scarecrow's Hat*. Peachtree, 2001, unpagged. Makes a fun puppet show. Build a scarecrow together: Gather a variety of interesting shirts, pants, hats, gloves, accessories, and heads (pails, plastic jack 'o lanterns)—donated or buy used. Have each child pick one clothing item for the scarecrow to wear or hold, or have the group vote which to use by raising their hands and helping you count the votes.

Brown, Peter. *The Curious Garden*. Little Brown, 2009. Unpagged.

Chernesky, Felicia Sanzari. *Pick a Circle, Gather Squares: A Fall Harvest of Shapes*. Illus. by Susan Swan. Whitman, 2013, unpagged. Serve "Shapes and Colors" snacks—alternate cherry tomatoes with cubes of yellow cheese and green oval basil leaves, folded. Parent supervision needed with skewers!

Cole, Henry. *Jack's Garden*. Greenwillow, 1995, unpagged.

Cousins, Lucy. *Maisy Grows a Garden*. Candlewick, 2013, unpagged. This simple book has moving parts, ideal for young toddlers.

Dahl, Michael. *From the Garden: A Counting Book about Growing Food*. Illus. by Todd Ouren. Picture Window, 2004, 24p. After reading, count the number of fruits on your tomato plants.

Davis, Aubrey. *The Enormous Potato*. Kids Can, 1998, unpagged. Act out the story, then dig up some root vegetables.

Donaldson, Julia. *Superworm*. Illus. by Axel Scheffler. Arthur A. Levine, 2014, unpagged. A wacky, positive book on worms to read before a worm composting activity.

Ehlert, Lois. *Eating the Alphabet: Fruits and Vegetables from A to Z*. Illus. by the author. Harcourt, 1989, 34p.

———. *Growing Vegetable Soup*. Illus. by the author. Harcourt, 1987, 32p.

———. *Leaf Man*. Illus. by the author. Harcourt, 2005, unpagged. Make your own leaf men—and women, children, or pets.

———. *Planting a Rainbow*. Illus. by the author. Harcourt, 1988, 22p.

———. *Waiting for Wings*. Illus. by the author. Harcourt, 2001, unpagged.

- Ering, Timothy Basil. *The Story of Frog Belly Rat Bone*. Candlewick, 2003, unpagged. The book provides inspiration for beautifying a neighborhood! How about making “seed bombs?” Instructions can be found at [kidsgardening.org](http://kidsgardening.org).
- Fleming, Denise. *Lunch*. Illus. by the author. Holt, 1992, unpagged. More simple colorful lead-ins to the Rainbow Garden program described in the article.
- Freymann, Saxton. *How Are You Peeling? Foods with Moods*. Photos by Joost Elffers. Arthur A. Levine, 1999 unpagged.
- . *One Lonely Sea Horse*. Photos by Joost Elffers. Arthur A. Levine, 2000, unpagged. Look closely at cauliflower, potatoes, and other vegetables and fruit to see if you can see faces or other objects. Make veggie and fruit prints using paint—you can find simple ideas online that go beyond carving a potato or apple.
- George, Lindsay Barrett. *In the Garden: Who's Been Here?* Greenwillow, 2006, unpagged.
- Henkes, Kevin. *My Garden*. Illus. by the author. Greenwillow, 2010, unpagged. The book offers imagination and silliness— what does your garden grow?
- Horowitz, Dave. *The Ugly Pumpkin*. Putnam, 2005, unpagged. A Thanksgiving story. (Spoiler: he's really a squash)
- Hubbell, Will. *Pumpkin Jack*. Whitman, 2000, unpagged. Yes, let your pumpkins rot in the garden!
- Kim, Sue. *How Does a Seed Grow?* Photos by Tilde. Little Simon, 2010, unpagged. This book is small but with large, clear fold out pages. Take a close-up look at seeds, fruits, and vegetables using a magnifying glass.
- Levenson, George. *Pumpkin Circle: The Story of a Garden*. Photos by Shmuel Thaler. Tricycle, 1999, unpagged. Loosely rhyming text and quality photographs tell the story of the pumpkin life cycle. Use sequence cards to have the kids recreate the order in which the life stages happen.
- Lin, Grace. *The Ugly Vegetables*. Charlesbridge, 1999, unpagged. The book ties in with the five senses—bring in unusual vegetables to look at, taste, and touch and smell the aroma of the soup.
- Mackay, Elly. *If You Hold a Seed*. RP Kids, 2013, unpagged. A quiet story about planting and waiting.
- Matheson, Christie. *Tap the Magic Tree*. Greenwillow, 2013, unpagged. Emphasize the touch element with a five senses theme.
- McElroy, Jean. *It's Harvest Time!* Photos by Tilde. Little Simon, 2010, unpagged. This small book contains very large, clear fold-out illustrations.
- McMillan, Bruce. *Growing Colors*. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1988, unpagged.
- Messner, Kate. *Up in the Garden and Down in the Dirt*. Illus. by Christopher Silas Neal. Chronical, 2015.
- Metzge, Steve. *We're Going on a Leaf Hunt*. Illus. by Miki Sakamoto. Cartwheel, 2005, unpagged. Find five different kinds of leaves, five different kinds of tree bark, etc.
- Miller, Pat Zietlow. *Sophie's Squash*. Illus. by Anne Wilsdorf. Schwartz and Wade, 2013, unpagged. As a prop, show a squash, with face added, wrapped in a blanket. If you've grown a lot of squash, let the kids pick their own and give them sheets of white paper towel for blankets.
- Minor, Wendell. *How Big Could Your Pumpkin Grow?* Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013, unpagged. The book takes celebrations of size to the heights of absurdity.
- Park, Linda Sue. *What Does Bunny See?: A Book of Colors and Flowers*. Illus. by Maggie Smith. Clarion, 2005, 32p. Let little listeners finish the rhymes by saying the colors. Find a 4-H member to bring in live bunnies!
- Pizzoli, Greg. *The Watermelon Seed*. Disney Hyperion, 2013, unpagged. Talk about what a seed really needs to grow. Find a watermelon in the garden, cut it open for the kids to share, and take out the seeds to plant.
- Rissman, Rebecca. *Shapes in the Garden*. Heinemann, 2009, unpagged. Find shapes in your own garden. Play “I spy with my little eye something that is shaped like a \_\_\_\_\_”
- Rockwell, Anne. *One Bean*. Illus. by Megan Halsey. Walker, 1998, unpagged. Help little ones to plant Bean Baby necklaces: get tiny jewelry zip-lock bags from a craft store, prepunch holes in the top edge of the bag (this isn't as easy as it sounds), place two beans inside, add a cotton ball, moisten with water using a medicine dropper, string yarn through the hole, wear as a necklace, watch it sprout, and replant at home. Create labels with a colorful garden logo to stick on one side of the bags.
- Sayre, April Pulley, *Go, Grapes!: A Fruit Chant* (Beach Lane, 2012) and *Rah, Rah, Radishes!: A Vegetable Chant* (Beach Lane, 2011). The books include photos. Introduce various fruits and vegetables, then use a shadow puppet stage and have kids guess the vegetable or fruit by looking at its silhouette.
- Schaefer, Lola M. *This Is the Sunflower*. Illus. by Donald Crews. Greenwillow, 2000, unpagged. The books contain cumulative stories. Show a short time-lapse video from Youtube.com (keywords to search: time lapse, seeds, sprouting, germination).
- Shannon, George. *White Is for Blueberry*. Illus. by Laura Dronzek. Greenwillow, 2005, unpagged. Let kids guess the riddles in the book. Most of the pictures relate to plants or nature. Afterward, look closely at colors in the garden.
- Siddals, Mary McKenna. *Compost Stew: An A to Z Recipe for the Earth*. Illus. by Ashley Wolff. Tricycle, 2010, unpagged. This rhyming alphabet book introduces ingredients that turn compost stew into rich soil. Have kids start a compost pile with some of the ingredients. Draw letters in the dirt.
- Soh, Morteza E. *Look What I Did with a Leaf!* Walker, 1993, unpagged. Make leaf rubbings using inexpensive leaf rubbing plates or real leaves from the garden. Or create “sun prints” of leaves— special light-sensitive paper can be purchased online.
- Weeks, Sarah. *Mrs. McNosh and the Great Big Squash*. Illus. by Nadine Bernard Westcott. HarperFestival, 2000, unpagged. The book is full of rollicking rhymes! Find the biggest squash in the garden.
- Wheeler, Eliza. *Miss Maple's Seeds*. Illus. by the author. Nancy Paulsen Books, 2013, unpagged. Preprint templates for paper “helicopter seeds” for kids to cut out, fold, and color. Launch them from a balcony, if you have one!