

THE EDIBLE GARDENS INITIATIVE, ISRAEL

On June 4, 2015, Gail Asper, the President of The Asper Foundation in Winnipeg, Canada, greeted an auditorium full of 200 children and their teachers, who have spent the past year taking part in the Edible Gardens Initiative in Dimona. For these students, the Edible Garden is a culture change.

The Edible Gardens Initiative, inspired by the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, CA, enables elementary schools to educate at-risk youth by using an "outside of the classroom" framework – essentially a garden – in which students can learn essential life skills and reinforce academic learning through hands-on experiences. Fully integrated into the school day curriculum, the garden provides a new and exciting platform for children to learn about science, literature, history, Jewish studies, leadership, entrepreneurship, nutrition and health. In addition to the students, their parents and community members take a vested interest in the garden, turning it into a community anchor.

This Initiative was created in partnership with The Asper Foundation, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), Jewish National Fund England (JNF UK) and the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI). The Edible Gardens Initiative is currently piloting in three schools in Israel's south (Dimona, Kiryat Gat and Ashkelon).

Spearheaded by pupils and teachers alike, the children and staff work hand-in-hand with a landscape artist to design the garden. Features can include ponds, fountains, wells, living walls, tunneled pathways, games, crops, hothouses, herbal gardens, outdoor classrooms, outdoor libraries and flowerbeds. Once designed, the school community works together to lay the foundations and bring the garden to fruition.

Gail Asper stated, "Gardens are children too. They need to be looked after". And that's just what happens in the gardens. Students take part in sowing, tending and reaping the produce. In parallel, SPNI professionals work one-on-one with each teacher to help them develop garden-based learning that is relevant to their teaching subject.

The garden is not only an academic space; it becomes a therapeutic space as well for the students. **As one teacher mentions "When a student is having a rough time in class, the student is comes out to the garden and it relaxes him".** Prior to the garden, most students had little connection to their environmental surroundings, or were aware of where their food comes. Through the Edible Garden Initiative, the students gain a deeper appreciation for the land, for nutrition, for the world around us and the importance of sustainability.

This Edible Gardens Initiative is expected to expand to an additional six schools in the coming years. For more information, contact Solly Kaplinski, Director of Overseas Joint Venture at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. SollyK@jdc.org.

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