

Fall Programming in School & Community Gardens (continued)

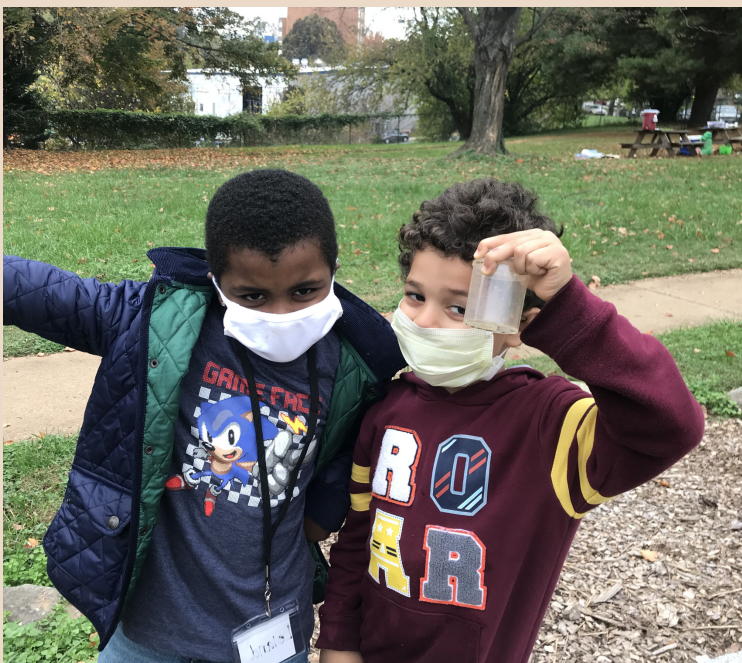


Without teachers, classes, & students in the garden, GC's scrambled much like everyone else at the start of the pandemic to rethink how to work during those uncertain times. No one knew if it was safe for the gardens to even be open to the public—which was the hardest part, because what is a school or community garden without the community?

Throughout April and May we did what most people were doing and shifted to creating virtual content for students to watch from home. It felt so different: recording videos of the gardens starting to flourish and come into their own as the soil warmed and flowers bloomed, while we were the ones getting to enjoy the beauty of spring first hand, while the youth were behind a screen. But there was hope and the videos all ended the same way: “We can’t wait until you’re back in the gardens with us!”

As June and July came and went and we neared closer to a new school year, it became clear that if we were going to get students back into the gardens in 2020 we were going to have to get creative and try something new: school year programming without the schools. By August we knew for certain that getting students into the gardens in the fall would mean focusing heavily on community engagement in the neighborhoods where students lived.

With equity as our guiding principle for engagement and limited capacity among the team of six, we knew we had to make accommodations for small, socially distant forms of engagement and prioritize low wealth communities. Knowing that 57% of City school students are eligible to receive free and reduced meals, Charlottesville City Schools (CCS) enroll a majority of students of color (60%), and that disparities across race occur in health and academic outcomes in CCS with Black students at higher risk in all categories, we intentionally focused offering free garden programming to students living in low-wealth neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color.



We'd spent time in July and August working in the communities where our students lived by supporting CCS Meal Distribution and becoming a recognizable face again to our students we hadn't seen in months. By early September we were registering students for fall garden clubs and held the first sessions the last weeks in September throughout the end of October.

One of these garden clubs took place at our Greenbrier Elementary Garden and was with students from the Hearthwood community! We picked students up from their homes after the school day and together made the walk to the Greenbrier Elementary garden by way of the Greenbrier nature trail.

Over the weeks students made four creek crossings per garden visit, hopping from stone to stone, or often walking right through the creek to get across in their rain boots. Perhaps the students' favorite part of the walk was catching crawfish at the first creek crossing! We saw many turtles, snakes, squirrels, and deer on those walks to the garden; always enjoyed a snack together when we made it; and spent time exploring, harvesting, and eating before making the hike back.

Over at Friendship Court another garden club was going on this fall. There, students explored the Urban Agriculture Collective garden across the road at 6th Street! Friendship Court Garden Club students spent time in their neighborhood garden planting, caring for, and harvesting lettuce & radishes that ended up in salads that they made! Students also went bird watching, completed garden scavenger hunts, went bug hunting, explored the soil beneath their feet, and did apple & pear taste tests!





Another fall garden club was underway at our City of Promise garden! Yolonda brought hands-on, fun activities for students every Wednesday during their lunch hour. It was a wonderful way for students to get outside with a break from their computers in the middle of the day! Students spent time working in the City of Promise garden doing everything from harvesting peppers to thinning carrots to pulling out the end of the season tomato plants. They also worked on a project to share their thoughts and write about healthier options that they would like to see in their school lunches.



Rounding out our fall garden programming was a partnership between Garden Educator Shannon and Abundant Life. Walker and Buford students participating in Abundant Life's tutoring program came down to the garden once a week with their tutors to spend a little time pitching in with their school garden and getting a much-needed break from computer screens.

Back over at Hearthwood with winter approaching, programming changed to be in the field across from the neighborhood as the sun set too soon to make the walk to the garden. In November students painted pumpkins, made nature collages, collected and saved seeds from plants around them, and most recently had a farmer visit from Lower Sherwood Llama Farm. We all met King the llama and Storm the alpaca and got to learn all about both animals from what kind of food they eat to how to make yarn from their fur!



The Cultivate City Schoolyard Garden team is beginning to look ahead to Spring and plans to host more garden clubs for students. We're thankful to be able to gather in small groups safely and to spend time enjoying and exploring the gardens together.