

The Kids are Alright! Youth Engagement in Cumberland County

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The EAC Our Food Project – Cumberland, has been working with local youth over the past two years on a variety of gardening and food skills training projects. In partnership with Schools Plus NS (<https://schoolsplus.ednet.ns.ca/>), students from the Amherst Regional District High School (ARDHS) and E.B. Chandler School, have participated in a number of work bees at the Amherst Community Garden.

The proximity of these two schools to the Amherst Community Garden affords easy access for students. ARDHS is less than a five minute walk down the street and E.B. Chandler is directly across from the garden, with only a tiny brook separating them. Students who are not concerned about getting a little muddy will attempt to cross the little ditch to arrive at the garden, in literally less than one minute. We have often talked about how lovely it would be to erect a little bridge between the two sites.

Typically, anywhere from about 10-15 students will participate in our planned food-related activities. Schools Plus is an after school program for area youth and is completely volunteer. The students who show up for garden work bees do so because they are genuinely interested in



earning about gardening or in helping out in their community. Many of the youth have little or no gardening experience, but are up for the challenge of putting in some often times, hard work.

Since we have begun partnering, local youth have contributed to opening and closing the Amherst Community Garden (<http://cumberlandfoodactionnetwork.ca/community-garden-network/>), which involved things like spreading compost in the Spring and clearing garden debris in the Autumn. The youth have also helped with weeding the large pollinator garden and berry patch. Last fall, students helped to plant a number of fruit trees at the garden. Youth have commented that they enjoy pitching in at the garden and we have big plans this year to plant a pumpkin patch in June and to return in the fall to harvest it. The work bees provide students with some great outdoor exercise and fresh air, while also relaying some important gardening skills.





Early last October, we held a local food BBQ at the garden, as a way of thanking the students for their contributions and to celebrate their achievements. Utilizing some veggies donated from the garden and some veggies from Side By Each Farm (<https://www.facebook.com/sidebyeachfarm>), a fabulous all-vegetarian feast was prepared. Students prepped the veggies, which were pre-

washed, by cutting them into cubes and skewering them. The veggie kabobs were a hit and many students came back for seconds, thirds, and fourths. Many had never tried some of the vegetables that were featured, such as white turnip, or eggplant and were pleasantly surprised that they liked more veggies than they thought they did! Thanks to the Our Food Project, we were able to purchase a picnic table and umbrella (sun shelter) for the garden this year, which makes the site now much more conducive to such social get-togethers.

This past winter, we held a pizza making workshop at the ARDHS. This was a very well-attended workshop as you can imagine, with close to 20 students showing up. Del Seto of Side By Each Farm led the workshop. She talked to the youth about how much money can be saved by making your own pizza and how it is a healthy alternative to boxed pizza, which is typically very high in salt and like most processed food, often made with low quality ingredients and lots of preservatives. Students learned how to work the homemade dough and to make a tasty sauce for the pizza. The student's creativity came out in each of these activities, but especially so in topping the pizza. When asked how they enjoyed the workshop and what they might have learned, students overwhelmingly agreed that it was most of all very fun, but several commented that it was also a good thing to learn how to make some food on their own, since they would be responsible for feeding themselves and their families once out of high school. I thought this showed some great foresight. Others said that they had no idea just how easy it was to make pizza and asked if we could come back and teach them how to make the dough from scratch. This is on our agenda for this upcoming year as a result.



Working the dough



(Above: Knife safety lessons by Del, Side By Each Farm)





Cutting into a final product!



(Above: Me, eating delicious pizza!...one of the perks of the job)

All in all I would say that working with local youth has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my job as a Food Coordinator in Cumberland County. Their openness and willingness to be a part of their larger community gives me hope for the future, which, for a jaded soul like me, is really something.

With the risk of giving my age away, I will leave you with a link to the song: [The Kids Are Alright](#), by the Who. (Hence the blog title).