

News

» NEWS TIP? Newsroom@denverpost.com, yourhub.denverpost.com or call 303-954-1201.

Community gardens feed the family

Children learn nutrition through gardening, which empowers them to eat well

By **Graham Ambrose**
YourHub Reporter

“Broccoli!”

Mark Garcia points and sprints toward a knee-high bed of leafy greens. He’s been clamoring for the vegetable for weeks, and now it’s finally ready for harvest.

He reaches in, picks off a small floret and — chomp! — takes a big bite off the head. A toothy smile spreads across his face.

Mark might be more excited about broccoli than any 4-year-old in the United States. That’s because unlike most preschoolers, Mark helped plant, grow and pick the vegetable, from dinky seed to edible snack.

Clayton Early Learning, an early childhood care and education center in northeast Denver’s Clayton neighborhood, uses community gardens to get children excited about eating healthy food.

Each weekday, teachers lead a group of tots at Educare Denver, a preschool at Clayton Early Learning, outside to work in 40 6-by-3-foot raised garden beds, watering plants, picking ripe fruits and vegetables and learning to recognize the names, scents, tastes and textures of the crops.

What begins as a vocabulary lesson in class (“What’s a zucchini?”) slowly gives way to more complex lessons on horticulture, botany and how to care for living things.

“We’re looking at ways to improve children’s lives holistically, through academic, emotional and social support,” said Rebecca Soden, chief program officer at Clayton Early Learning. “All of the research shows that nutrition in early childhood is the foundation for the rest of a child’s life.”

Nutrition can fall to the wayside in neighborhoods like Clayton, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture lists as food deserts. Many residents here struggle against poverty (more than 80 percent of the families Clayton serves have incomes below the



Lilah Fay, 4, left, and Ashlynn Davis, 4, students at Clayton Early Learning, pick vegetables in the school’s garden July 19 in Denver. *RJ Sangosti, YourHub*

federal poverty level). Lacking convenient alternatives, many local families buy food at the cheapest option near their homes — gas stations, corner stores and fast-food restaurants, where healthy meals are limited.

In Denver, nearly 1 in 3 children ages 2-14 is overweight or obese, according to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. Clayton Early Learning instructors use the community gardens to curb those realities by offering a sustainable source of healthy produce for children and their families. Clayton administrators say that fewer than 13 percent of the program’s 2- to 5-year-olds are overweight.

Staff members say the learning center’s gardens meet the produce demands of all interested Educare families, who also can pick up canned and dry goods at a local food bank. The garden and food bank offset families’ grocery bills and help spur families to start home gardens

of their own, staff members say.

However, much of the gardens’ yield stays on the campus, where a chef and his team prepare meals for children and staff members, accommodating individual food allergies and intolerance as well as dietary restrictions. The kitchen team even prepares its own healthy and fresh baby food.

Gregory Shain has been Clayton’s full-time chef for 12 years. A fifth-generation Coloradan and an alum of Early Head Start, he’s worked in more than 35 kitchens, including coffee shops, country clubs, bison ranches and cruise ships. He finds purpose helping teach kids about growing food and the value of healthy meals.

“This isn’t just a job,” he said. “It’s something I really want to do.”

The nature of the position forces him to cater to competing palates: preschoolers and their adult teachers. Clayton provides daily breakfast,

lunch and snack for every child on campus, ages 6 weeks to 5 years. Though Shain wants the children to like the food he serves, he prioritizes feedback from the teachers, whose eating patterns and preferences model healthy habits for the youngsters.

“Parents say to us all the time, ‘Good luck getting my kid to eat vegetables,’” said Kristen Wilford, Clayton’s health and disabilities specialist. “But when they grow something of their own, they’re sold.”

Clayton provides care from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., and staff members hope the children learn good behaviors and habits and develop a taste for healthy foods that finds its way into family homes.

Through nutrition, Clayton’s staff hopes to empower families to rear healthy children who can thrive later in life.

“A hungry world is not a just world,” Soden said.