

Growing Trend

Big Island

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Students at Waimea Country School plant flower bulbs and start a sunflower garden as part of their daily learning.

Photo: Amy Salling

IT'S NO SECRET: Hawaii is facing a farmer shortage, which could one day cripple the state's local agriculture industry. That's why for the past year, Nancy Redfeather, executive director of the Hawaii Island School Gardens Network, has been working closely with Big Island parents and educators to get students interested in farming by creating their own on-site gardens.

"School gardens enhance classroom curriculum and teach kids about the importance of food, how to work together, sharing and many other Hawaiian values," Redfeather says.

The School Gardens Network, which does not receive any subsidy from the Department of Education, provides resources, support and funding for interested schools. According to Redfeather, each school garden is unique, varying in the types of crops grown and the size of the garden. For example: Honokaa High School's garden is about 11,520 square feet, and Waimea Middle School yielded about 170 pounds of food in the 2007 to 2008 school year.

"School gardens are living laboratories," says Redfeather. "It's also tied into really helping to change the nutrition of our children." She points out that in Hawaii, there is a high incidence of childhood obesity and early onset adult diabetes.

The gardens network consists of about 45 public, private and charter schools from the Big Island. Students are involved at every level of gardening from planting to fertilizing and harvesting. The students consume most of the fresh produce as healthy snack alternatives. However, several schools, such as Paaui Elementary, hold weekly farmers' markets for family and friends.

"If you've got your keiki and youth coming up through good, solid garden programs, by the time they get to be seniors in high school, a lot of them will have already developed good eating habits," Redfeather

says. She also adds that piquing the children's interest at an early age will hopefully motivate some of them to pursue careers in agriculture later on.