

Local News

Planting seeds of good health

Waimea school's 'Crop Share' aims to make fresh produce accessible

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A stroll through Waimea Middle School's Mala'ai culinary garden can start your stomach rumbling.

Artichoke. Green beans. Tomatoes. Lemongrass. Onions. Arugula. Chili peppers. Cucumbers. Sunchokes. Spinach. Cilantro. The list goes on and on.

As one of the largest and most ambitious school gardens on the island, Mala'ai has helped spark a movement to emphasize sustainability and farming practices in daily lesson plans across the state.

Here on the Big Island alone, as many as 50 schools have planted their own gardens, many using Mala'ai as their model, according to the Hawaii Island School Garden Network.

For five years, teachers and volunteer gardeners have guided Waimea Middle's sixth- through eighth-graders as they learned how to grow a variety of fruits and vegetables.

As part of students' physical education requirements, they are required to spend several hours in the sprawling garden. Organizers say that when students grow their own food, they develop an appreciation for sustainability, as well as a preference for healthy foods that will hopefully stick with them all their lives.

And, said garden executive director Alethea Lai, lessons learned in the garden often reflect what's taught in the classrooms.

"For instance," she said, "we recently grew wheat, which is not grown commercially on the Big Island. But it tied in perfectly with their social studies classes on ancient civilizations."

Now, the organizers of Mala'ai are hoping to share the fruits of their students' labors, both literally and figuratively, with the Waimea community.

In collaboration with The Kohala Center, the culinary garden has begun a series of "Crop Share" events, at which members of the community are invited to visit Mala'ai and take home some of the garden's bounty, as well as bring surplus of their own to share with others.

The events were previously known as "Crop Swap," said program coordinator Nicole Milne, but the name was changed after organizers learned that some people weren't attending because they thought they had to have something to trade.

"It really is a sharing event," she said. "In fact, we have three or four residents from Waipio who bring food ... and they never ask for anything in return," she said.

Crop Share takes place Saturdays in the garden from 12:30 to 3 p.m., she said, and at the end of the day, any excess food is delivered to local food banks.

"Last year, we gave away about 6,000 pounds of food," Milne said.

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Mala'ai Culinary Garden Executive Director Alethea Lai explains to Kaiser Permanente Clinic Manager Lloyd Tanaka how students at Waimea Middle School use a gardening glove on the end of a stick to tell when their taro patch is ready for harvest. - Photo By Colin M. Stewart

According to Waimea Middle Community Liaison Patti Cook, Crop Share is also conveniently timed after the morning farmers markets have wound down, so farmers can bring leftover produce to share with the community.

Spreading the gospel of fresh produce and its educational and health benefits is a task that administrators with health insurer Kaiser Permanente are happy to support. On Wednesday, they presented Crop Share with a grant for \$5,000 to help the pilot program get off the ground.

"The long-term benefit is that the kids are learning where food comes from and they're finding it accessible and enjoyable," said Dr. Jeffrey Tolan, who serves as the chief of Kaiser's clinics in Waimea and Kona. "We're exposing them to more and better types of foods. ... I was so impressed by this whole concept."

Lloyd Tanaka, the Waimea and South Kona clinic manager for Kaiser Permanente, said programs like Crop Share and the Mala'ai garden are two of the best ways to combat modern children's sedentary lifestyle.

"We've seen a decreased activity level in kids. They're just not being physically active. They're staying indoors and playing video games."

But, he said, "you can't do gardening remotely. There's no such thing as virtual veggies. It takes a lot of work."

Tanaka added that Waimea Middle School's efforts line up with Kaiser Permanente's HEAL initiative, which stands for "healthy eating and active living."

Support from organizations like Kaiser is important, Lai said, because keeping the garden going is an expensive proposition, with costs as high as \$200,000 a year.

"We are very excited to add to our program of community food and education events," said Nancy Redfeather, program director for The Kohala Center's Hawaii Island School Garden Network.

"We encourage everyone to bring their surplus produce from their farm or garden to exchange with others in the community. If you don't have produce to share, you can just lend a hand to participate. No one will be turned away."

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Crop Share

What: Crop Share fresh produce exchange program

Where: Mala'ai Garden, Waimea Middle School, 67-1229 Mamalahoa Highway

When: 12:30-3 p.m. Saturdays, Dec. 11, Jan. 15, 22 and 29.

More info: <http://www.malaai.org>