

# Learning to Grow

Student-led agriculture projects at Sheboygan Falls High School are providing unique learning opportunities

Anne Davis

**S**chool was out for the summer but the lessons were just getting started for Ashley Cotcher, 17, a student at Sheboygan Falls High School. There were tomatoes to check on, peppers to plant and a huge pile of mulch to spread around the fruit trees. Not to mention the chickens and the bees.

Lesson number one: the work never ends when you're tending the miniature truck farm and more located behind the Sheboygan Falls High School building. But Ashley doesn't mind.

"I like it all!" she said enthusiastically about the non-stop list of chores. She even likes those tasks that many people avoid. "I find weeding very soothing," she said.



The gardens are part of an outdoor project developed by Bruce Brunner, who teaches agriculture education at the school. Although other projects had been tried in the area, which was once a pond, the gardening effort really began with the construction of a hoop house — an outdoor greenhouse — two years ago. The hoop house allows Brunner and his students to get a head start on the growing season and keep the plants going into the fall. An outdoor garden is located next to the hoop house and this year the students are growing a long list of vegetables from lettuce to tomatoes to kohlrabi and peas. There are also blackberry and raspberry bushes.

In the adjacent orchard, the fruit trees are still too young to harvest, but the chickens, which actually belong to Ashley, produce an average of nine eggs a day. Two bee hives are located in a secluded area behind the school's football field. Last year, the bees produced 40 pounds of honey that the students sold as a fund-raiser for their programs.

## Student-Led Gardens

Ashley is one of five high school students who signed up to spend five days a week working mornings on the gardens, orchards and associated projects throughout the summer. They receive one-half credit for their work, which includes planting, weeding, watering, collecting eggs, and harvesting produce. Last year, they produced 1,200 pounds of tomatoes as well as other vegetables, and much of the produce was frozen for use in the school cafeteria.

This summer, they expect to produce so much that they have constructed a farm stand called Cornucopia near the gardens where they will sell produce and fresh eggs to the public. They set up a Facebook page and are hoping to generate business through social media and word of mouth.

They will also be selling their wares at the local farmers' market.

This is the second summer that Ashley, who will be a senior this fall, has worked on the gardens project. She became interested after taking

**"I like it all! I find weeding very soothing."**

— Ashley Cotcher (shown right), Sheboygan Falls High School Student



## Learning to Grow

one of Brunner's classes called Green and Growing as a sophomore.

"I kind of fell in love with it," she said, adding that she particularly enjoys the hands-on learning that working on the gardens provides.

"It's all trial and error," she said. "It's OK to make mistakes and we grow from it, literally."

For instance, last summer the tomato plants grew too big, making it hard to take care of them. They learned from a local expert that they needed to take off the suckers to help the plants grow up not out.

Siblings Andrew and Amber Pashley, who are also working on the summer project, live on a farm so working on the gardens comes naturally. Andrew, 16, who wants to study veterinary science after high school, has been working with the

bees. A local beekeeper gives the students advice on how to care for the hives and Andrew hopes that the bees will produce even more honey this summer.

Amber, 15, enjoys gardening but doesn't think she will go on to a career in agriculture. This is her second summer working on the project and she particularly enjoys harvesting.

"You can't pick a pea and not eat one," she says.

Although her mother has a large garden and her family lives in the country, Carson DePagter, 15, had never really been interested in gardening. Then she took a class from Brunner and signed up to help on the summer project. She, too, enjoys the hands-on learning agriculture classes provide.

"It was like a break in my day where I could just go outside and

deal with the plants," she said.

She also enjoys helping to choose what to plant. When Brunner asked what types of vegetables they should plant this year, she suggested kohlrabi because the vegetable was one of her personal favorites.

### Large-Scale Effort

The emphasis on healthy school lunches has led to many schools planting school gardens. But few operations are on the same scale as Sheboygan Falls. Its project is even more remarkable when the district's size is considered — Sheboygan Falls has three schools and a total enrollment of about 1,750.

One of the issues with school gardening projects is finding enough students to help during the peak season — summer when classes are out and many high school students have jobs and other activities. But





Brunner has always been able to find students to help and he works with them, overseeing the operation and assigning tasks.

In addition to the summer program, Brunner’s agriculture classes grow plants from seed in a greenhouse inside the school and work on other projects including aquaculture and hydroponics. In the spring, students grow annuals and put together baskets that are sold to local businesses and the general public.

### ■ Research Work

The program has recently drawn some statewide attention. This summer, students are conducting a field trial for UW-Madison on new varieties of lettuce. The students collect data on the size of each variety as it develops.

This spring, Alfonso Morales, an associate professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at UW-Madison, visited

Sheboygan Falls High School and toured the agriculture education projects. He heard about the program from a Sheboygan Falls graduate who went on to study at Madison.

Morales studies food systems, including urban agriculture, public marketplaces and street vendors, and their role and function in community building and economic development. He talked with Brunner about getting the school district’s gardening programs involved with local food banks and other efforts designed to provide healthy food for low-income families.

Brunner has had preliminary talks with Nourish, a non-profit based in Sheboygan that runs several farm-to-table initiatives, but no formal collaboration has been set up yet.

Brunner says he has no immediate plans to expand the current summer gardening programs although he could envision building

a second hoop house sometime in the future.

“Besides we still have a lot to learn about the tomatoes,” he said, looking at the rows and rows of plants in the hoop house.

Just like school, a garden’s lessons are endless. ■

*Anne Davis is a freelance writer.*

