

The Learning Garden

By Carole Brodsky

High school football players and drama club members are working side by side with others this summer to grow organic produce in Fort Bragg destined for local farmers markets, restaurants and students' lunch plates.

Grows More than Food

It's all part of The Learning Garden's Summer Youth Intern Program, which in its sixth year is "a more ambitious program than ever before," says Linda Pack, executive director of the Noyo Food Forest in Fort Bragg.

The high school's all-organic Learning Garden allows students to grow food and sell crops to local restaurants and farmer's markets. Gowan Lester is the Food Forest's Farm

Manager. "Gowan teaches a structured curriculum focusing on plant biology, soil biodiversity, propagation, food sovereignty, sustainability, business management and the future of local agriculture," Pack explains. Interns attend four-week sessions and work approximately 15 hours per week.

"Our goal is to provide the school district with organic food, be a model for students and improve the lives of our community members," says Pack.

The garden is a two-acre plot filled with greenhouses, compost piles and a garden overflowing with snap peas, carrots,

fava beans, lettuces, apples, berries, artichokes, cherries, kiwis, collards, Jerusalem artichokes, flowers, tomatoes, cucumbers and squash.

In addition to homeschoolers and public school students, kids performing community service are intermingled with the interns, who are selected by an application process that includes written essays and recommendations. "This summer I made the decision to combine these groups," says Lester. "We've got football players and drama club members becoming a cohesive group of friends working together," she smiles. Interns receive a stipend provided by a generous grant from the Mendocino Coast Children's Fund, with additional support from the Fort Bragg Grange. When they aren't weeding, kids are discussing genetically modified





Jonathan Leong checks tomatoes in the green house



Natalie Soto, left, and Eliza Lance weed the garden

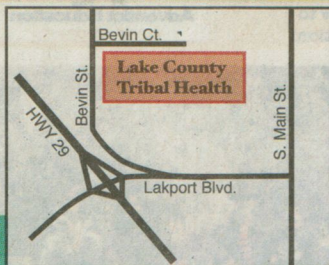
foods and other food justice issues. "They love cooking, preparing dishes directly from the garden," says Lester. They journal and utilize a "learn as you go" approach to being in the garden- immersing themselves in farm life.

The program changed Eric Herrejon's way of thinking. "It's been a good experience learning about making compost, planting and harvesting. We're helping our planet and I'm learning about local farms. There are benefits around saving money and eating your own food. I like the hard work," the Fort Bragg High senior smiles. "There's a lot for

me to learn. From doing this, I know I want to have my own garden."

Eliza Lance, 17, a senior at Mendocino Community High, has connected the program with her schoolwork. "I've never been into gardening before. It's good to know how to work a garden. It ties in with

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Top Left to right: Gowan Lester, Jerry Carroll, Jonathan Leong, Eric Herrejon. Bottom, Left to right: Natalie Soto, Vivian Toscano, Eliza Lance.

carbon and nitrogen are important for good composting. Every day we learn something new and take the skills we learned into the garden. I come back home and say, guess what I did?" she smiles.

And she enjoys working at the Farmer's Market. "People are so happy that teenagers are growing local food," Soto smiles.

my senior project, which will analyze four types of eating styles," she says. The program had such an impact that she plans to continue helping out with the next group of incoming interns.

For Vivian Toscano, also a senior at Fort Bragg High, the program has helped her prepare for the coming school year. "What I really like is learning how the plants work. I love harvesting, weighing out the

produce and preparing the crops for delivery. I've learned more about the right way to plant crops, and I would like to continue to volunteer here," the 17-year-old says. "Next year I'll be taking an advanced placement environmental science course, so this has helped me prepare. The feeling of accomplishment is great."

Natalie Soto, 16, is a Fort Bragg High senior. "Today we learned how

Farm Manager Lester will be sad to see the interns go and is proud of the contributions they've made to the project. "I would love to keep all of them. They have volunteered above and beyond their time commitment. It's great to have their youthful enthusiasm," he concludes.

For more information about the program call 964-0218 or visit noyofoodforest.org.

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