

During the 10th annual Youth Garden Symposium in San Francisco last August, conference leaders and attendees explored the connection between nutrition and environmental education in school gardens.

BY LISA VAN CLEEF

TEACHING environmental education and nutrition through the filter of the school garden was the focus of the American Horticultural Society's 10th National Children & Youth Garden Symposium, held August 1 through 3 in San Francisco, California. The broad-based agenda explored the fundamental concerns facing garden-based learning including teaching methodologies, funding issues, standards applicability, and getting a school garden started. The attendees included parents, classroom teachers, outdoor educators, gardeners, and non-profit administrators from across North America.

BAY AREA HOTBED OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL PROGRAMS

While the topics were indeed weighty, this was not the typical dull, hotel ballroom-bound conference. Taking advantage of the pioneering work in environmental education and school gardening taking place in the San Francisco Bay area, the bulk of each day was devoted to "field study" at successful local programs.

California has led the way in communicating the value of plants and the environment to its children through the school system. Its state superintendent of public instruction, Delaine Eastin, launched the



groundbreaking "Garden In Every School" initiative, which encourages and supports school gardens, garden-based education, and an increased awareness of children's relationship with plants.

Among the innovative programs conference attendees had an opportunity to visit was the Edible Schoolyard, one of the crown jewels of California public school gardens, located at Berkeley's Martin Luther King Junior Middle School. Founded by famed restaurateur Alice Waters, the garden's mission is to create and sustain an organic garden and landscape



Delaine Eastin, left, receives an award from Mary Ann Patterson, right, AHS's director of national programs and public relations.

that is wholly integrated into the school's curriculum and lunch program.

The California Native Plant nursery at Presidio National Park was another field study highlight. Here, in the nursery's environmental education program, seventh- to 12th-grade students learn biology, science, social studies and art. The more than 60,000 plants grown at the nursery each year are used throughout the park in a native plant restoration project underway at the 1,480-acre former military post. Students are involved in seed collection, seed germination, and planting. Participants also enjoyed the Roots and Shoots Garden at the Elizabeth Gamble Center in Palo Alto, developed by Dirck and Molly Brown.

Also on the itinerary were stops at several of the area's outstanding botanical gardens, including the Filoli Center in Woodside, the University of California Botanical Garden in Berkeley, and Strybing Arboretum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Strybing has an ambitious youth education program that serves thousands of students annually, as well as a teacher-training program.



Organic food grown in the Edible Schoolyard garden is used in school lunches.

PASSIONATE SPEAKERS

In addition to the tours, symposium participants enjoyed listening to lively and inspirational speakers who shared success stories and experiences with children's gardening. Among these was Eastin, California's first woman school superintendent, whose impassioned speech on the value of garden-based education earned her a standing ovation.

Noting that during her tenure, California has added 3,000 school gardens, she said that "contrary to what some detractors say, we can teach curriculum standards in the garden, and gardens can be integrated into the curriculum everyday."

Eastin noted that growing food is a transforming experience for kids. She cited a study that showed 72 percent of the students who had taken environmental education classes scored higher in standardized tests than their peers who had not taken such classes.

Despite the advances made through

The garden "is the ideal place to show children the essential cycle of life that surrounds us, that there is renewal everyday in the garden."

—Sharon Lovejoy

school gardens, Eastin made it clear that many challenges lie ahead. "Most kids still think food comes from the store," she said, and have no true connection to gardening or farming. Eastin vowed to keep pressing until there is a garden in every school.

Eastin spoke during a banquet that also featured the presentation of the Society's Great American Gardener's Award

for youth gardening, the Jane L. Taylor award, to the National Gardening Association (NGA), a non-profit group headquartered in Burlington, Vermont. The NGA received the award because its children's gardening programs promote environmental responsibility, advance multidisciplinary learning and scientific literacy, and create partnerships that restore and enhance communities across the United States and the world. Joan White, NGA program director, accepted the award on behalf of her colleagues.

The symposium's opening day included a general session panel comprised of some heavy-hitters in the world of nutri-



At the Filoli Center, intricate knot gardens appeal to children and adults alike.

tion, environmental education, and kids gardening. These included Sharon Lovejoy, author of children's gardening books; Bill Andrew, from the California Department of Education's Office of Environmental Education; Rodney K. Taylor, director of food and nutrition services for the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District; and Joan Dye Gussow, impassioned educator, nutritionist, and author

Andrews stressed that environmental literacy was as fundamentally important as reading and writing. "It is a language older than words," he concluded. The straight-talking Gussow, who suggested that in some cases educators are overstressing nutrition at the expense of simply talking about food. "Kids don't eat nutrients, they eat food," she said. She also encouraged people to allow children to get dirty in the garden without obsessing about hygiene.

Lovejoy's presentation focused on how the garden could be used to teach

everything from ethnobotany to art. The garden, she said, "is the ideal place to show children the essential cycle of life that surrounds us, that there is renewal everyday in the garden."

The second day's program included a presentation by Michael Abelman, an author, farmer, and founder of the Center for Urban Agriculture. Abelman shared his experiences farming a small piece of land on an island in British Columbia. Speaking as a farmer and father, he noted that in some cases school gardens are the only connection students have to nature. He challenged participants to change this disturbing trend by focusing on achieving small successes at the local level.

The final day's program began with an address from Mary Ann Patterson, the Society's director of national programs and public relations. She described her own experiences of her "moments of truth"—the situations when it became clear to her that today's kids are disconnected from nature. "Everyone in this room has had similar experiences and that's why we are all here today," said Patterson.

What does the future hold? Patterson shared the American Horticultural Society's commitment to providing the public with greater and more comprehensive links to resources, stressing the importance of linking gardens to nutrition, supporting the creation of new smaller public children's gardens across the



Another award-winning garden toured by attendees was the Roots and Shoots Garden.

country, and serving as a national facilitator to unite the efforts of organizations that share similar goals.

Lisa Van Cleef writes a weekly gardening column for the online edition of the San Francisco Chronicle.