



'Roots and Shoots' Teaches Kids How to Go Organic

By Rachel Stern, Science Interchange Reporter

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A group of children in Marin City are about to learn how to go organic. Starting next month, the Learning Center Garden Project will host a "Roots & Shoots" environmental youth group, where low-income and special needs children will get to eat organic food grown with their own labor. The children will be involved from start to finish: helping to construct straw-bale greenhouses, using them to grow plants, and finally feeding themselves and their community.

"Our goal is to help kids understand where their food comes from," said Denise Rocco-Zilber, director of the Roots & Shoots project. "We want them to know what's around them in their backyard and that they have to protect it."

Rocco-Zilber started the Roots & Shoots group inspired by a larger program developed by the legendary chimpanzee specialist Jane Goodall, which has members around the world. For the past four years, Rocco-Zilber has traveled extensively as an environmental photographer, focusing on fragile ecosystems, environmental issues and habitats. She has developed workshops for teachers and other educators by putting her material online. She said she came back to Marin specifically to do a hands-on project in her own backyard.

Rocco-Zilber said her research led her to Marin City. "I learned it was an underserved area," she said, through Community Action Marin, a non-profit group that serves the region.

Before the greenhouses are built, the coordinators will discuss with the children and their environmental education teachers how the construction will proceed and what the finished product will look like. Currently, the project coordinators are looking at different designs and materials; they are leaning towards greenhouses constructed with posts made out of recycled lumber and sides that are a combination of Plexiglas and bales of straw. The children and teachers will develop a curriculum around the greenhouses, asking questions such as why such structures are needed for a specific climate.

After the building is complete, the children will save seeds, plant them in the greenhouses, grow them, and transplant the plants to larger gardens that are being planned now. They will compost their own soil, and they will put down recycled cardboard under the garden beds so that weeds cannot go through. A planned community and parent outreach campaign will encourage the children to drop off food scraps for the recycling and compost bins.

"We chose to create the greenhouses on campus so that the students could have a more cyclical relationship between seed care and what they actually eat," said Abby Wing, who instructs environmental education at the Marin City Learning Center. Wing is a certified permaculturist, or a specialist in sustainable use of resources and land.

The Roots & Shoots project will involve a total of 65 students from the Marin City Learning Center and about 15 adult volunteers. Stipend money from the project will be used to pay Marin City teenagers for their after-school involvement. Children from the Manzanita Child Development Center located nearby probably also will be involved.

“We'll plant [the greenhouses] outside, fill them with perennial plants, and have more organic food,” said Wing. “Hopefully, what we grow in the greenhouses will benefit the whole community.”

And if not the whole community, Rocco-Zilber says, Roots & Shoots will at least be beneficial to the preschool, kindergarten and after-school care children at the Learning Center. The children range from ages 2 through 8.

Rocco-Zilber said that the staff of the daycare center have been excited by the children's response to the project, particularly those who come from challenging situations or have special needs. “They have an unbelievable turnaround when they are working outdoors,” she said. “They become excited and engaged.”

The program will run through September, when a community food festival is planned to take place at the garden. Booths will be set up for children to display different learning projects, such as maps and foods they have created. Children and community alike will feast organically.

RESOURCES:

Interested in volunteering? Contact the Marin Learning Center at 415-339-2832

Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots program: www.janegoodall.org/rs/index.html

Permaculture: <http://csf.colorado.edu/perma/>

Denise Rocco-Zilber's photography: <http://oneworldjourneys.com>