Food Safety and School Gardens

Introduction
“Grow it, know it, try it … love it!” a phrase coined by the National Gardening Association describes the national effort to get children interested in gardening and excited about consuming fruits and vegetables. School gardens provide a wonderful opportunity for a magnitude of learning experiences. Teachers are incorporating interdisciplinary gardening lessons for subjects such as science, math, social studies, and English. One important subject that cannot be overlooked is food safety during planting, harvesting, and preparation of the foods that are consumed.

Here Are the Facts
Foodborne illness outbreaks related to the consumption of fresh produce have gained national media attention. This publicity may generate some food safety concerns from school officials. School nutrition professionals can provide valuable information on ways to prevent foodborne illness and should lend their expertise during interdisciplinary lessons in the classroom.

Application
Here are some food safety reminders to consider during planting and harvesting:
• Discuss your intent with the local health department. The health department can evaluate the safety of the water supply and the possibility of run-off contamination from the adjacent land.
Application, continued

• Create a garden to keep animals out by concealing the area with a fence.
• Consider planting seeds in containers and keeping the containers in the classroom during the growing period.
• Avoid cross-contamination. Be aware of the possibility of transferring dirt from garden gloves and shoes to another area.
• Wash hands after manipulating the soil or planting seeds. Pay close attention to the dirt under fingernails and wash hands to remove all visible debris.
• Wash hands after handling turtles, toads, and any other of nature’s creatures.
• Wash hands after using chemicals.
• Transport foods from the garden to the classroom in clean, sanitized containers.

Here are some classroom food safety tips for preparing garden-fresh foods:

• Wash hands before cutting, preparing, or eating fruits or vegetables.
• Use clean, sanitized, and dry cutting boards and utensils.
• Wash produce under running water.
• Do not allow sick children to prepare foods for other children.

Remember, follow state or local health department requirements.

References


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