Growing Our Own School Lunch
By: Jeannine Pao

The bell rings. Finally, it's lunchtime. Do you know where your lunch came from? Around the country, there are programs that teach kids to think about where they get their food. Let's visit one of these programs—the Edible Schoolyard (ESY) at Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School in Berkeley, California.

In their science class, ESY students learn how to grow food. Then they learn how to cook the food in "the kitchen classroom." Let's take a closer look at how these students learn about the food they eat.

The students of King Middle School created their garden from scratch. In an abandoned lot next to their school, they pulled weeds and removed chunks of asphalt with pickaxes. Under the weeds and junk, the soil they found was not in good condition for growing food. So the students planted something called cover crops. (When these plants grow, they get plowed back into the soil to provide food for the soil. It's like growing your own fertilizer!) The students also added lots of compost. This rich soil is produced when vegetation (leaves, grass clippings, banana peels, apple cores, and more) rots and breaks down. Adding compost is a great way to enrich garden soil.

Sure, gardening is hard work. But the students have a lot of fun, too. One year, they planted beets in the shape of a heart, growing a living heart-beet! They plant their crops by hand, build frames out of bamboo to support plants, learn about the seasons in the garden, and maintain the compost pile. Not only do they get to play in the dirt, they have to.

But the best part of the garden experience is eating, of course. The students eat peas in their pods and tomatoes right off the vine.

They snack on berries and edible flowers as they work. (This is safe because the Edible Schoolyard doesn't use any chemical fertilizers or pesticides.) Once food has been harvested in the garden, students take it to the kitchen classroom. Here, the students do everything—from chopping and cooking to setting the table with tablecloths, silverware, and flowers from the garden. Each day, the students make delicious, healthy dishes. They sit down together to share what they have prepared. After eating what they've made, they take the kitchen scraps out to the garden where they're used for compost to help grow more food.