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## Leadership taking root

**Garden teaches students about hard work and the food that they eat**

**By Joe Tash**  
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The best part about working in a garden, said Morse High School junior Reginald Paragas, is planting seedlings in the ground. "It's sort of like you started it. It's your responsibility to take care of it."

The worst part? That would be the worm droppings.

"I'm just not a big fan of worms. The smell of it is immensely horrendous," Reginald, 16, said of the droppings, which are used as plant food.

Reginald is one of seven students in the Seeds of Leadership Youth Garden program, which offers lessons about hard work, environmental awareness, healthy eating and growing your own food.

The program also offers paid internships through a \$31,500 grant from the San Diego Women's Foundation. Students work in the 4,000-square-foot vegetable and flower garden at Morse after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and on Saturday mornings. They collect \$400 at the end of their eight-week rotation, when a new batch of students takes over.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune  
Reginald Paragas (left) and Tyree Roberts worked at the compost bin. Students in the Morse program work in the vegetable and flower garden on campus three days a week.

The grant, which runs through June, also supports a part-time coordinator, who teaches the finer points of composting, planting and methods of protecting plants from predatory bugs without pesticides.

Reginald and his fellow interns are tending to winter crops such as mustard and collard greens, kale, Swiss chard and several varieties of lettuce – all laid out in neat rows in the school garden, a fenced enclosure on the edge of a parking lot.

The produce grown in the garden is used in the Hungry Tiger, a student-run restaurant on campus; sold to teachers and school families; and eaten by the student gardeners themselves.

The garden is a joint project of the southeastern San Diego school and the San Diego Roots Sustainable Food Project, a nonprofit group dedicated to increasing the supply of locally grown food.

"We're seeing it as a model for other schools in San Diego,"

said Julia Dashe, the gardening coordinator, who learned about organic gardening through her involvement with a program called the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, and in classes at UC Santa Cruz.

“It’s important for teens to have opportunities to do meaningful work and get paid for it,” said Dashe. “Work with dignity that gives back to the community and prepares us for the 21st century, with green technologies and a green economy.”



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

Morse Students in the program work in the vegetable and flower garden on campus after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and on Saturday mornings.

The garden program dovetails with the Terra Nova Academy, a 140-student “school within a school” at Morse focusing on environmental awareness, nutrition and culinary arts.

“We’re trying to help at-risk students get involved in school, giving them themes that will engage them,” said Terra Nova lead teacher Bridget MacConnel, who spent hours of her own time on weekends and during summer vacations to create the garden from a patch of shrubs with help from student volunteers.

The academy aims to prepare students both for college and food service careers, but also has a more practical side – MacConnel said many of Morse’s 2,700-plus students come to school hungry. More than half qualify for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. The Terra Nova program and school garden, she said, can help students make better choices about what they eat and drink, improving their nutrition and overall health.

Seeds of Leadership is open to all Morse students, and it involves not only getting their hands dirty, but going out into the community to spread the word about the importance of healthy, locally grown food. Recently, the interns spoke at a meeting of the Skyline-Paradise Hills Planning Committee, and they have also made presentations at elementary schools.

The current crop of interns is a mix of 10th- and 11th-graders, with interests ranging from football and wrestling to dramatic arts.

Tyree Roberts, 16, wants to study biology and environmental science in college, and he was told by a college recruiter that his application should include community service. That prompted him to apply for Seeds of Leadership.

“I probably wouldn’t be a farmer. But it’s actually pretty cool planting things, growing your own food,” Tyree said.

On the other hand, a life in the fields would suit Paul Achee, 15, just fine.

“I’d like to be a farmer. That would be the ultimate thing, my dream come true,” Paul said. “I love the interaction with nature and being able to dig in the earth in the middle of the city.”

Zaina Nunez, 16, said the lessons she has learned through her internship will make a difference in what she eats from now on.

“I didn’t know most of our food was grown with pesticides, and you could get cancer from that. That surprised me,” she said.

Morse students are especially in need of the lessons offered by the Seeds of Leadership program because, unlike other parts of San Diego, the surrounding community has no farmer’s market or commercial agriculture, said Dashe, the gardening coordinator.

"Southeast San Diego is one of the places I would call a food desert in San Diego," she said. "There aren't any commercial gardens in the area. There's no local food production. Unless you grow it in your backyard, there's no access to farm-fresh food."

That may change if an ambitious plan by school officials becomes reality. MacConnel said a 1.5-acre plot on campus has been eyed as a site for a community farm to be run jointly by students and local residents. Food grown on the farm could be sold to restaurants and grocery stores, or could be used to make products such as salsa or salad dressing, which would in turn generate revenue for the high school.

Classes in business management, marketing, computer graphics and science could be built around the farm, MacConnel said.

While no funding source has been identified, MacConnel said, "It's going to come to us any way and every way possible," whether through donations, grants or volunteer effort.

"There's so much that can happen."

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■ Joe Tash is a freelance writer.

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