



Teamwork from the horses' viewpoint: children learn about working with draft horses on Steve and Gloria Decater's Live Power Farm in Covelo, CA. ©Steve Decater

## A Gardening Journey: Horticulture in the Waldorf Curriculum

*Ron Krupp*

I believe there are three professions that play key roles in a Waldorf school: the teacher for the pedagogical work, the doctor for the purpose of care and healing, and the farmer and gardener who provide nutritious foods to the school community.

With this in mind, I believe that farming and gardening need to be an integral part in the curriculum in Waldorf schools. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. In the following article, I want describe how gardening and farming can be part of a child's experience from kindergarten through middle school. I will also raise a number of questions as a challenge to the Waldorf school community. While handwork and the arts are critical to the development of the child, the oft-neglected gardening and farming vocations can help our young ones develop a connection to the earth as well as foster what I call moral character. Let's begin by considering why a garden and farm curriculum is so critical to the child's development.

Rudolf Steiner didn't share much on the subject of children and gardening, but I will attempt to explain what I believe he meant when he once said that the child needs to follow the grains of rye through the seasons. In doing so, I believe they gain a sense of the wholeness of nature and their place within it. Gardening should be seen as more than simply a craft organized as a series of tasks aimed at the production of food. It's healthy for children to follow the whole cycle of nature: to plant pumpkin seeds and nurture the young plants to large orange globes; to cut out jack-o-lantern faces and help make pumpkin pies, roast seeds, and save some for next year's plantings. Kids want to be connected to, not feel isolated from, their environment.

A gardening curriculum should follow the seasons, allowing this sense of connection to grow slowly and subtly within the child. It is more than a matter of spreading rye seeds on a field in the spring or visiting an apple orchard in

the fall. There must be a reason for planting the rye. Children need to see the field early in its history, during the growth cycles of the grain, and then after it is plowed under and another crop planted. They need to experience how the grains are sown, cultivated, and weeded, then harvested, cleaned, and used to make bread and animal feed. This process should not simply be verbally explained during the early years, but should rather be directly experienced. The children need to see the work of the farmer through the year and observe the connection of the farmer to the plant and animal kingdoms.

We are given an example of Rudolf Steiner's views in this regard in Karl Stockmeyer's book *Rudolf Steiner's Curriculum for Waldorf School*.<sup>1</sup> Steiner is quoted as stating, "It can be said that a person who has learned to distinguish between rye and wheat without having observed them growing in the fields has not attained the ideal." He continues, "As teachers we should avoid going on botanical expeditions to collect specimens to be shown in the classroom. The children themselves should be taken out and wherever possible, be brought to understand the plant world in its actual connection with the earth, with the rays of the sun, with life itself. Through this we can find the transition in a quite naive way to something else which is very important."

Ideally, the farm and garden need to be a shared part of the school organism, in which the farm produces food for the school community and the community in turn provides economic support for the farm. In this setting, the children participate fully in agricultural activities; they see the farmer and gardener doing real work and they in turn view their work in a more serious vein.

Our children will appreciate and learn from the natural world when they grow up close to nature and are schooled in gardening, science, and nature study from the kindergarten on. Those years of experience and study live on in a much deeper way than anyone can imagine. An inherent wisdom and morality is found in the healthy work of horticulture.

If young children are free to dig, touch, smell, gather, and explore, their chances of becoming lovers of the earth and the plant kingdoms are strengthened. As the young ones move from kindergarten through the elementary years and on to middle school and beyond, this type of curriculum can become an integral part of their learning. Small green thumbs can grow into larger thumbs, who can heal the earth and become better citizens. There is something to be said about how the honest work of caring for the land rubs off onto those who participate in this most honorable of professions.

### **An outline of an "ideal" gardening curriculum for grades 1–8**

The following examples of activities that have been used to

shape an "ideal" curriculum are drawn largely from the experiences of a class guided through their eight years by Monica Marshall at the Monadnock Waldorf School in Keene, New Hampshire. They are offered here as possibilities, not a blueprint.

#### *First grade*

In the first grade, children sing songs and listen to nature stories and poetry tied to the seasons of the year. They play in a small outside garden, and take nature walks down to the river. The children work in the little school garden, but it is not a very conscious activity. The idea is to have a place for free outside play. In the fall, the children plant bulbs and take geranium cuttings to grow over winter for gifts on Mother's Day. They play and hear stories about elemental helpers such as the flower fairies and Brother Sun and Sister Wind.

#### *Second grade*

In the second grade they do more of the same and also listen to Native American stories. They have a little harvest and Thanksgiving festival, complete with corn blessings to the four directions: east, west, north, and south. In the spring, they clear the earth, prepare the soil, and plant wheat, corn, beans, and pumpkins for the coming year. The class visits a small farm and presents a gift of three apple trees, which they help the farmer plant. Throughout the year, they bake bread once a week in class and also make butter and cream.

#### *Third grade*

In the third grade, gardening "goes big time." The wheat is harvested along with the corn, beans, and pumpkins that were planted the previous spring. The wheat is threshed and winnowed and saved for grain, which is ground into flour. Each student weaves a corn dolly from the grain straw and buries some grain in the earth as a gesture of thanks. The third grade makes seven-grain world bread from the wheat they grew along with rye, barley, corn, and oats. They also pick apples on a local farm and make apple cider using an old press.

They return to the small farm they visited the previous year, staying for two nights. They have real workdays helping in the gardens, building compost piles and milking the cows. After all the harvesting and cooking of their meals, they sleep soundly in the barn.

In most Waldorf schools, the third grade has been set aside for a special block on gardening and farming. The ages of nine and ten are a sensitive time in a child's life when there is the first realization of being alone and separate in

the world. This is why storytelling from the Old Testament is so important, as it shows how the individual meets challenges and stands to serve the greater good. Through the gardening experience, the child also meets the farmer as he or she serves for the good of all, a true husbandman. In this way, the existential separateness gains meaning and connection to the world.

#### *Fourth grade*

In autumn, the fourth graders again visit the farm, and help to harvest pumpkins, squash, potatoes and corn. A local Native American storyteller comes to the farm to tell them tales. An old woman in her eighties reminisces of the days when her family had a small farm on which they grew all their food. The children continue to work in the school garden and plant trees in a local county forest.

#### *Fifth grade*

The children began to do more serious and practical work at the school: repairing and building new fences, fixing the rock walls, and doing regular garden chores. Gardening in the school garden is combined with the study of the botany and geology of the area. The class goes on mushroom walks, hikes the Appalachian Trail, and watches Canada geese fly south for the winter.

#### *Sixth, seventh and eighth grades*

The class starts a business called Earth's Garden Nursery. Seedlings are grown in the school greenhouse and sold for three years to friends, parents, and the community to raise money for class trips. The students run the business, keep the books, and learn how to start plants from seeds and by other methods of propagation. In the seventh grade, the class runs a composting program at the school and begins a flower gardening project in the town common.

In the eighth grade, the school raises funds to send the class to Costa Rica to study the rain forest, build nature trails, hike, and study. Students experience the diversity of the plant, animal, and mineral kingdoms, and the relationships and symbiosis of the three.

#### **Some questions to consider**

Since writing *The Woodchuck's Guide to Gardening* in 2000, I have traveled a bit around New England leading workshops on "Children and Gardening" at a number of Waldorf schools. I've learned through these visits that very few schools offer a horticulture curriculum from kindergarten throughout the grades. Some schools have a gardening block in the third grade. Other schools build a relationship with a local organic or biodynamic farm, but for the most

part this only occurs with one or two classes. This is not a scientific survey, rather just my impression.

In these workshops, I describe what Rudolf Steiner said about gardening with children. I then share some examples of gardening with kindergarten children and describe the possibilities for an ideal garden curriculum as mentioned above.

In the final part of the workshop, I ask some questions of the teachers and parents and invite their participation. These questions help to facilitate a process that will hopefully lead to a greater involvement by the school community in organizing and maintaining a garden/farm curriculum. While some of these questions are redundant, I've found it advisable to approach the problem from different angles:

- Has there ever been discussion in the school community regarding the need for a comprehensive gardening/farming program from kindergarten throughout the grades? Are gardening activities currently focused on the third grade gardening block led by the class teacher or the school gardener?
- Is there a teacher or parent, individual or group who takes on the responsibility for the gardening/farming program at the school?
- What kind of gardening/farming program do you currently have in your school – from kindergarten through the middle school grades?
- Do you have a connection to a farm and garden in the community and how does this work?
- If you don't have a gardening and or farming program, would you like to? Why? What is your hope for the future in terms of a gardening and farming program?
- What resources – farms, nurseries, and gardeners – are there in the community that could be tapped for a program?
- If you would like to institute a comprehensive farming/gardening program, how should you begin? Who should be responsible for starting the process?

You can begin by sketching a vision of the ideal gardening curriculum and then determine who will support this vision, and in turn, how they will be supported. At the beginning of the process, the school as a community needs to gauge its commitment to the establishment of a gardening program, and identify the players – the teachers, parents, gardeners and farmers in the community – who will carry out the shared vision. What I've often found when talking to parents and teachers is that there are in fact unrecognized resources in the community, such as local organic/biodynamic farms and gardens. It is important as a part of this process to develop timely goals, and to determine how and by whom those goals will be implemented. The creation of



a complete curriculum will of course take financial resources, but that isn't where the process should begin. Establishing commitment comes first. Developing a gardening program is much like growing a garden. Careful planning, proper preparation of the planting bed, choosing crops that are suited to local conditions, and paying attention to all of the cultural requirements can in both activities lead to bountiful harvests.

### Notes

- 1) Stockmeyer, E.A. Karl. *Rudolf Steiner's Curriculum for Waldorf Schools: An Attempt to Summarise His Indications*. Second edition,

trans. by R Everett-Zade. Forest Row, E. Sussex, UK: Steiner Schools Fellowship, 1985

Ron Krupp is the author of *The Woodchuck's Guide to Gardening*, an organic/biodynamic gardening publication. Having received the *Christian Science Monitor* Gardening Book of the Year Award for New England in 2002, the book was revised and went into its fourth printing in 2004.

The last section of the book is on children and gardening and includes material used in this article. You may purchase *The Woodchuck's Guide to Gardening* through the Biodynamic Association. Inquiries regarding workshops can be addressed to Ron at <woodchuck37@hotmail.com>.

## To Think Like a Plant Grows

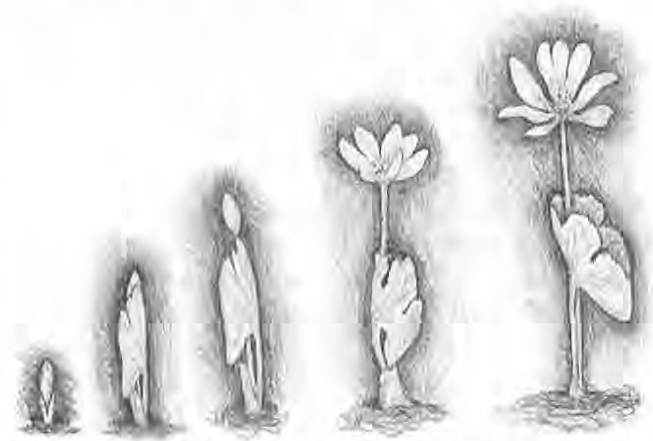
Craig Holdrege

What would the world look like if we as human beings were able to think like a plant grows? Imagine gaining such flexibility of thought that our ideas were no longer rigid, static and object-like, but grew, transformed, and when necessary, died away. And as with plant form, what if our thoughts and actions revealed the living qualities of the world we inhabit? What a revolution! This is the revolution that the poet and scientist Goethe began with his approach to understanding nature. It is a way of wakefully entering into the living forces of the world and learning to think and act in harmony with them. This revolution can provide a strong infusion of living thought and responsible action into our culture.

In *BIODYNAMICS* 252, Mark Riegner described this kind of holistic way of knowing (Spring, 2005, pp. 29–36). As a way of understanding the connections between phenomena and discovering the underlying wholeness in nature, this approach lies at the heart of biodynamic agriculture. It can help farmers and gardeners begin to perceive the “agricultural individuality” that Rudolf Steiner describes in his lectures on agriculture.

This precise, pictorial way of thinking runs counter to most habits of modern thought. It avoids extremes we find so widespread in our culture: on the one hand, the drive to find causes of things in matter and to manipulate life as a mechanism; on the other hand, in the search for meaning in a seemingly empty material world, taking flight from the earth and living in pictures of mysterious, disembodied spirits. The Goethean approach provides a healthy middle way – finding spirit and meaning in nature through careful, attentive observation and focused, imaginative thinking.

But to learn an approach that reveals life in nature – to learn to think like a plant grows – entails mobilizing new forces within ourselves. It does not occur overnight. To provide the opportunity for people to learn this new practice over a longer period of time, The Nature Institute is offering a new, semester-long (eleven-week) training in a Goethean approach to science. It will be held for the first time in 2006, from April 2 to June 16. The course will be in the springtime, since this allows the activities to grow out of the genius of place and time: the rapidly and richly unfolding plant life in spring in the Northeast will be a natural focus for the course. The Institute is located in biodynamically-farmed Hawthorne Valley in upstate New York. In addition to the farm's pastures and meadows, there are forests, wetlands, creeks, ponds and many transitional habi-



The development of bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), one of the first spring flowers to bloom in rich eastern woodlands.