

Digging Into Learning

FARMERS AND PROGRAMS PROMOTE AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION WITH LEARNING EXPERIENCES



In the San Luis Valley, schoolchildren look forward to the annual field trip to a local farmer's pumpkin patch, where they get to select their own pumpkins. But recently, this trip has expanded to include an additional destination: the carrot fields at Grimmway Farms.

Grimmway farmer Clint Kerrick suggested the idea to the event coordinator while chaperoning a field trip for his own kids. From that conversation, a new fall field trip tradition began.

Now, every September, Kerrick welcomes San Luis Valley's

elementary school students to the farm, where each child brings their own grocery bag to fill up with carrots they pick themselves.

"We talked to them beforehand about how we planted the carrots, how they grew, how we harvested them and all that," Kerrick says.

The older children tend to ask a lot more questions – the younger kiddos were just excited to get their hands dirty and dig – but one thing that ran true with all ages was the desire to find the biggest carrot.

"A lot of the kids here do grow up on farms, but it's all potatoes, alfalfa, grains or cattle," Kerrick

says. "The whole carrot thing was completely new to them. It was great to see their excitement."

Kerrick feeds his community in other ways, too. He donates carrots to his kids' school during harvest season, following the lead of local potato farmers who do the same.

A Community Food Project

In Gunnison Valley, Mountain Roots Food Project is a major partner in fostering the connection between education and local food. Launched in 2011, Mountain Roots has grown their farm-to-school program, created two on-site

Grimmway Farms welcomes San Luis Valley's elementary school students to the farm to learn how carrots are grown and try their hand at harvesting them. Grimmway Farms also donates carrots for school lunches.

school gardens and developed an environmental science curriculum with experiential learning. Besides serving as a hands-on learning ground for students, the school gardens also provide fresh produce to the schools' cafeterias.

"For the past 10 years or so, we've been working to get more local, fresh food into the cafeteria," says Holly Conn, executive director of Mountain Roots. "Our garden staff meet with cafeteria managers and discuss what to plant, so more of the things our students and volunteers grow can be incorporated into the menus."

At the beginning of the 2021 school year, Mountain Roots also stepped up to help when one of the schools didn't have enough staffing to run the cafeteria. They crowdsourced school lunches with a "Buddy Box" program, which ran for eight weeks. Families and business owners made extra lunches and dropped them off at the school to ensure the kids who would normally have free lunch had something nutritious and delicious to eat.

Beyond its educational endeavors, Mountain Roots helps local farmers establish and scale up their farms to bridge the gap between producers and community members who experience food insecurity. When the pandemic hit, Mountain Roots went into overdrive with its efforts.

"Everyone everywhere needed food," Conn says. "We doubled our own growing space and helped other farmers increase their growing spaces. Then we began purchasing food from local farmers, which helps keep their business running, and we distribute fresh food weekly for free to people in need."

– Kelly Rogers

Find more online

To learn more about Mountain Roots Food Project, visit mountainrootsfoodproject.org.



Mountain Roots Food Project in Gunnison Valley works to connect education and local food through on-site school gardens and hands-on learning.

