When nutrition requirements in school cafeterias nationwide were changing in 2010, Barbers Hill ISD School Nutrition Director Susan LeBlanc knew it was time to update her teaching tactics as well. In the past, LeBlanc had visited classrooms as a guest speaker to talk about nutrition, but moving forward she wanted to do something more hands-on with her lesson plans. In two years, she combined her love of gardening with 600 square feet of unused school property to create a thriving teaching garden that has reaped bountiful harvests of healthy foods and learning opportunities.

Among other things, the revamped Texas School Nutrition Policy requires fresh fruits and vegetables at every meal. Actually convincing children to eat those vegetables is a whole other challenge. For decades, mealtimes have ended with parents and children sitting at opposite ends of the table debating the value of eating spinach. Yet LeBlanc has overcome many children’s skepticism by bringing ownership to the table and making the process of growing vegetables a fun learning experience.

Says Barbers Hill Primary School counselor Carol Layman: “Susan’s task was to make vegetables fun so that students would try them and hopefully begin to eat the kinds of food that would be good for them too.”

The concept began with creating a small strawberry patch for special education students to tend. Yet LeBlanc didn’t stop there. She contacted the primary school principal, teachers, high school agriculture students, grounds crew and local master gardeners and explained her plan for a teaching garden. With the district’s support, LeBlanc invited the Barbers Hill Primary School second grade teachers to participate in creating the school’s first school garden. The thinking was that second graders were mature enough to work in the garden, and it would give first graders something to look forward to the following year. Soon, everyone was ready to dig in the dirt.

Second graders at Barbers Hill Primary School show off an abundant carrot crop.
LeBlanc devised an intricate layout and assigned each second grader a 12x12-inch plot. Each student was given a marker to stake his or her piece of land.

“The first year, we loaded 66 kids, including the high school Future Farmers of America, on a bus and asked them to help us pull weeds at the garden site,” says LeBlanc. “Within 30 minutes, the weeds were gone. I heard many of the high school students comment that the closest they got to gardening in the second grade was a bean cup.”

The second graders plant their fall garden in mid-October and harvest it in February; the spring garden starts in March and is harvested at the end of the school year. In the fall, the garden includes broccoli, cauliflower, three types of lettuce, snow peas and carrots. The spring garden includes tomatoes, green beans, corn, cucumbers, watermelon and cantaloupe.

“After we finished planting the seeds the first year, all you could see was a sea of white sticks with the second graders’ names popping out,” says LeBlanc. “I was as anxious as the students to see the results.”

Excitement grew as the students vigilantly checked their plots. While the students waited, LeBlanc taught them about composting.

“The kids loved stuffing the compost bin with leaves, food scraps, eggshells and grass clippings and watching it spin around,” says LeBlanc. “It was a great opportunity to teach them that many materials can be reused and put back into the soil to help the garden grow.”

LeBlanc uses curricula from the National Junior Master Garden program. In 2011, the second graders completed the certification program for growing a vegetable garden. This program has offered many hands-on, interdisciplinary learning opportunities.

“The students learned how important bees and pollination are to the environment,” says LeBlanc. “They also used measuring and counting skills to plant and water the seeds; analyzed soil for proper light, water and nutrients; learned the effects of regional climate on the plants; watched two green tomato hornworms evolve into moths; and got regular exercise. This garden made learning fun and gave us a chance to go beyond the textbook to make long-lasting memories.”

The second graders also study which parts of a plant can be eaten, as well as the function of each part. Students learn that the roots absorb nutrients and water; stems act as the plant’s plumbing system; leaves capture sunlight; flowers contain the plant’s reproductive parts; fruit covers the seeds; and seeds...
contain new plants. After completing the lesson, the second graders partner with high school FFA members and take their fresh and canned vegetables to the local outreach center’s food pantry.

**Growing pains**

In creating the school garden, LeBlanc learned that some vegetables grew faster than others, which left some students with nothing to anticipate for the next three months.

“I learned that radishes grow really fast and cabbage takes up a lot of space,” she says. “I was learning along with the students about how to stage it out so that each student’s plot was constantly growing something.”

For instance, LeBlanc learned that broccoli and carrots have longer growth periods than lettuce and spinach, so she now groups these vegetables together so that students can enjoy the harvest more than once.

Because the students grew the vegetables, they were more prone to taste-test the results. At harvest time, each classroom shares their fresh produce in a classroom salad bar.

“By 2011, 25 percent more students ordered vegetables in the cafeteria than in 2010,” says LeBlanc. “I’d say at least 90 percent of the children are willing to taste these vegetables, and a few usually return for seconds. When a student, beaming with pride, pulls a carrot out of her garden plot, eating healthily suddenly becomes fun.”

Often the garden produces more vegetables than the students can eat. When this happens, the children pack their backpacks with broccoli and carrots.

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— Susan LeBlanc, school nutrition director, Barbers Hill ISD
"The kids are always thrilled to share the garden with their families," says LeBlanc. "It’s become a tradition to watch the second graders load the school bus waving their big carrots. Many of the students convince their parents to eat vegetables they had never eaten before, and some of them even convince their parents to grow their own home gardens."

The second grade garden is a project that Superintendent Greg Poole thinks other school districts could implement.

“We are all guilty of traditional thinking, but student obesity is a growing problem, and it requires progressive, innovative strategies,” he says. “Learning is about engaging a student’s mind, and our garden is an ideal example of instruction without walls. Mrs. LeBlanc is a leader in both the lunchroom and in the garden.”

The Barbers Hill second grade garden has accomplished more than plentiful harvests; it has created learning opportunities and a new approach to healthy living. LeBlanc has even added gardens at the intermediate and middle school campuses.

“Mrs. LeBlanc has connected learning with fun in such a way that she is creating a healthier generation,” says Layman. “She deserves huge kudos for taking the initiative and following through with this worthwhile project.”

AUTUMN RHEA CARPENTER writes content for regional and national magazines, newspapers, companies and websites.

Barbers Hill students Emily Quartz and Christian Royer won top honors with their tomato plants in the horticulture category at the Youth Project Show this past May.