



Winter in Wisconsin and Facing the Challenges of a Frozen Outdoor Reality within Educational Communities Impacted by Ongoing COVID Concerns



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My first thought when viewing the school gardens last fall was let's get these fruits and vegetables into the hands and mouths of our scholars. The harvest education work was accomplished using intensive planning to direct and support numerous community volunteers and educators, in providing multiple opportunities for scholars to connect with living edible plants, harvest, explore nutrition lessons and taste tests, and even meeting a local urban farmer. Scholar enthusiasm was impressive! In that busy and constructive fall outdoor growing chaos I began to wonder how do we keep this engaged connection with edible plants growing forward?

As the days shortened and grew colder and colder while the COVID threat turned to Omicron and school buildings continued limiting visitors, I pondered the possibility of indoor lessons. How do I create meaningful lessons that keep the nearly 350 currently engaged scholars safe and interested in learning more about the edible plants while inside their school buildings during winter and COVID? So, I searched, I asked, I pursued possibilities!

For nearly three months I doggedly grew the vision of having elementary aged scholars in 4-year-old Kindergarten through Fifth Grade grow their own edible plants indoors. Thanks to some impressively talented and experienced staff at Rooted, I prepared to present the opportunity of growing microgreens in classrooms to the two school communities in Madison with which I am working. What did we need; teacher, volunteer and parent commitment, the proper equipment, time, funding, a means to purchase and have equipment delivered to the schools (during COVID supply chain issues)...and yes, access to the school buildings! It took nearly three months, yet the planning, seeking, researching, supportive encouragement and persistence paid off... by early January 2022, scholars at Mendota Elementary were growing edible microgreens in their classrooms. Scholars at Crestwood started their microgreen projects two weeks later!



I was nervous and excited right along with the scholars and their teachers. Little did I know that the months of preparation would lead to new stressors of managing the project and all of the competing expectations regarding project ownership. I found out quickly that the teachers who were vested in engaging their scholars, providing space for student hands on responsibility for caretaking and outcomes, were the classrooms that got the most out of the project. As is typical, this was the first real growing of a live plant opportunity for many scholars. The ones that took nurturing the plants seriously really got attached to them. One young learner looked at me horrified when I stated we were ready for harvest. He clearly stated, "No, I can not cut my plant." This opened the opportunity to discuss food producer attachment in its many forms. Once these emotions were validated and processed, the learners harvested their plants and enjoyed a tasty microgreen mix salad together.



Lessons learned from this experience were numerous and as varied as the individuals participating. Personally, I was most pleasantly surprised and impressed by the added sense of enthusiasm, personal, and community commitment, caring for plants brought to the participating classrooms. One educator reported, "Now we finally have jobs and an increased sense of community. The scholars are excited to come to school!" Beyond learning to grow and eat leafy greens that taste good, the students grew emotionally and socially through the responsibility of taking care of their plants collectively.



As we are wrapping up these indoor growing projects we are starting to talk of and plan for spring and the outdoor wonder this season brings to edible schoolyards in Wisconsin! I personally wonder what new opportunities for scholar growth are waiting outside.

