

First Certified School Garden on Arizona Reservation

May 4, 2015 Access, Arizona, Engagement farm to school, native, Navajo Nation, school garden, Tuba City, Tucson FoodCorps

“I would rather have my daughter eat what you guys grow out there than the food I get off a truck,” said Georgiana Adson, Tuba City’s School Food Service Director and the mother of one of our Edible School Garden students. With that she approved our request to pursue Garden to Cafeteria certification for our school garden. From there, my co-service member Alicia and I began navigating the standards required by the Arizona Department of Health Services for produce grown in school gardens to be served in school cafeterias.



Service Member Alicia Tsosie, School Garden Sanitarian Kathryn Mathewson, and Service Member Will Conway stand proud at the Tuba City Primary School Edible School Garden.

The state of Arizona’s Department of Health Services (AZDHS) has a “School Garden Sanitarian,” Kathryn Mathewson, who promptly answered our questions, providing us with the information we needed to accurately modify our garden to meet the standards. With the help of other service members from FoodCorps Arizona we relocated our compost pile to a new site down-slope from the garden beds. To prevent any harmful compost runoff, we dug a semi-circular ditch around the compost pile and filled the ditch with gravel.

After visiting certified school gardens in Tucson and witnessing an inspection at The STAR School, our excitement and confidence grew. Certification seemed attainable and applying for a visit from the sanitarian became imminent. Our soil was lead free, our water clean. Our Food Safety Plan and Compost Standard Operating Procedure adhered to AZDHS guidelines. We had a binder full of logs to keep records of everything from hand washing to pest contamination. Most importantly, our lettuce heads were growing fuller everyday with warmer spring temperatures.

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Alicia Tsosie and Will Conway gather radishes out of a high tunnel.

Our garden was ready to be certified, but was the cafeteria staff ready to alter their routine and begin receiving our produce? Another meeting with Georgiana was in order. Much to our satisfaction, Georgiana and her staff were more than accommodating, showing promising enthusiasm for their newfound purpose of serving garden fresh veggies to children.

On April 7th, 2015 Kathryn Mathewson made her first ever visit to a school garden located on tribal lands. That morning, the Tuba City Edible School Garden became the first garden on The Rez to receive Garden to Cafeteria certification.

The following Monday, we sanitized our harvest crate and harvest tools in the cafeteria kitchen, took the short walk to the school garden, and harvested the lettuce heads the students helped grow. We handed our lettuce off to the kitchen staff and returned to our offices. We waited anxiously for lunch service so we could see how the lettuce would be presented and how the students would react to it.

As we entered the cafeteria, we could detect pride in the kitchen staff's voices as they informed the kids "There's lettuce from the garden over there! Put the lettuce on your sandwich! Go try some lettuce!" The kitchen staff made an effort to prominently display the lettuce and distinguish it with the charming, 'Tuba City Grown' and 'Local School Lunches' signs that our students had made earlier in the week. Students approached the container of lettuce with smiles on their faces. Unable to control their excitement, many students bypassed the provided tongs, and grabbed lettuce leafs with their hands. They placed lettuce on their cheeseburgers or next to the veggies on their trays. I witnessed a third grader scoop three spoonfuls of peanut butter onto his cheeseburger—a less-than-relevant detail that cannot be omitted. He took some lettuce as well.

The students saw their food through from seed to cafeteria tray. The result was a lunchroom full of kids happily munching on lettuce they grew. This type of ownership over food helps to address the dietary health issues crippling the people indigenous to this land. The Navajo Nation is larger than West Virginia, but there are only ten grocery stores. Hot Cheetos can be found at any convenience store, but obtaining a delicious, juicy apple is almost impossible, and buying a bland, mealy apple is a chore. At the Tuba City Primary School, the first school on the Navajo Nation to have a garden to cafeteria program, students can now grow food outside their classrooms and eat that food in their cafeteria.

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