

Farm TO Preschool

by Ardis Eckel



Debra Moses grew up in the city of Kenosha, Wisconsin, without a garden in sight. But she recalls family reunions at her great-aunt's country home, where she sat down to straight-from-the-garden fare of fresh-squeezed grape juice, tender sweet corn, and parsley-buttered crackers.

Currently living in Colorado, Debra wanted to help today's youngsters enjoy garden-fresh vegetables, too. Working with Jim Dyer, who heads the Southwestern Colorado Healthy Community Food Systems project

preschoolers, children age 5 and under, because those years are when healthy—and unhealthy—food habits form.”

Program duties began with surveying county preschools about their abilities to provide healthy snacks and lunches to their preschoolers, if they were able to buy products from local producers and were aware of seasonal availability, and if they were able to do any gardening on their properties.

That last part—gardening—is Debra's favorite. “My original dream included living on a farm,” she says. Instead, she's living in Durango, Colorado, with her husband and their preschool-age son. Raising an in-town garden presents a challenge. And raising a garden in Durango raises the bar even more. Durango's 6,500-foot elevation shortens the growing season to around 100 days. Fluctuating temperatures, low humidity, drying winds, and alkaline clay soils all add to the challenge. “You have to work with the conditions,” Debra says, “and you have to fight them a bit.”

In the garden, that means giving plants a head start by growing them from seed indoors under a grow light. Once they're planted outside, it means “choosing the warmest spots in your yard for some crops, and using row covers to extend the season on both ends.”

As a Farm to Preschool program educationalist, it means finding

creative ways to grow food with and for preschoolers. “We started with the school my son attends,” Debra recalls. “As with many preschools, there is little land available for growing a garden. So we talk about ways to work around that, like small raised beds, or putting a raised bed on wheels so that it can be moved. Grow bags can be used to squeeze crops into small places; these tough, plastic bags with handles can be moved into the sun or out of the way.”

For preschoolers in Debra's area who attend class during the summer, gardening can be extra educational. “They can plant carrot seeds, beet seeds, or seed potatoes in the spring,



then water and watch the plants grow through the summer and be there when the vegetables are ready to harvest. There's a lot of fun in dumping the grow bag's contents and discovering the 'treasure' that was buried under the dirt.”

“If a preschool can't raise a garden, teachers can have a farmer come and talk to students about growing food. Or at the very least, teachers can cut open a squash during class so that preschoolers can look at the skin, seeds, and edible flesh. Offering

ideas like this are what we do. We communicate ways to create a culture of learning about our food—how to grow it, harvest it, prepare it, and eat it.”

Another goal of Farm to Preschool is to increase the connections between preschools and neighboring farms and ranches. “Many area daycare and preschool providers, chefs, and cooks want to incorporate Farm to Preschool principles,” Debra says. “Our goal is to give them connections, ideas, and sources. We connect preschools with companies like Adobe Milling, a



company in our corner of the state that grows and markets dried Anasazi and pinto beans—healthy foods the schools can use while supporting the local economy. We talk about what farmers here grow and how to connect with them to purchase produce.”

Seeing preschools incorporate change makes Debra happy as an educationalist, as the mother of a preschooler, and as a human being. “Compared to accomplishing something grand, like women running their own farms or women starting agricultural programs in Africa and other countries, this may seem small-scale,” she explains. “But it's my hope that this program and resources from the Project Materials page at HCFS.org, such as the Parent Snack Sheet and the Sample Local Foods Menu, will inspire women and mothers to take steps to get more healthy and local foods into their own family's meals, into snacks they bring to schools, and into school and daycare programs.

For Debra, it all comes back to the garden, big or small. “It feels great to see kids who are all excited about pulling a carrot out of the ground. It gives me hope, it makes me feel like we can go in this direction of a healthier food system and healthier children. And through this, we can even create a healthier planet.”



(HCFS.org), she acts as a part-time educationalist with the project's Farm to Preschool program.

“While the Farm to School project has been in effect for many years,” she says, “we now realize that the movement should start with