Listening with Respect: Issues of Class and Race in Working the Land

— by Karen Payne, Program Director, American Community Gardening Association

When they hear that I’m involved with community gardening and children’s gardening, people often say, “Oh, isn’t it the greatest thing for kids. Don’t the children just love being in the garden?” In my experience—and from what I hear when listening to teachers and parents—some kids love the garden and others can’t stand it. Just like the adults I know. Some of my best friends don’t like gardening. They love fresh food, they love flowers, most of them like looking at beautiful gardens, but they have absolutely no interest in growing any of it.

In working with From the Roots Up, a mentorship program that helps new community garden organizations, I hear quite a lot about challenges as well as successes in starting gardens. In addition to the individual responses people have to the opportunity to cultivate a patch of earth, I have come to see that there are significant social and cultural meanings attached to gardening and agriculture, which have an impact on people’s responses to working the soil. Not surprisingly, these meanings apply to children as well. The differences can be related to a child’s race, culture, or class—as well as their individual personalities and experiences.

Age can also make a difference. Many pre-school and elementary school children of all cultural backgrounds seem to experience the garden as fun, a time to explore the wonders of nature and play in the dirt. By the time they get to middle school, however, clothes, status, and the intense pressures of conformity tend to be much more important. Working or playing with dirt is not particularly good for any of those things. Thus issues concerning race and class tend to arise much more among middle or high school students (and their teachers and parents) than among younger children.

Our culture values technology, speed, and convenience. Growing food on a small scale highlights none of those things. All of us have been exposed to the ideals of progress; we are led to believe that large scale is more efficient than small scale and that technological advances are supposed to eliminate manual labor. In addition, stereotypes about working the land are not usually positive.

We can’t expect children (or their parents and teachers) to suddenly transcend the values and the judgments of the society they live in. It is not so surprising when today’s students feel that garden work is stupid. They reflect mainstream American values in their conviction that working the land is

- low Status,
- low Tech,
- Undervalued knowledge
- low Pay,
- Irrelevant and inconsequential
- Dirty.

Plus it messes up fashionable sneakers.

Sometimes, it is the parents or teachers who are upset that their children are gardening as part of their school work. Isn’t this just exactly the kind of back-breaking toil they hoped their kids would escape by getting an education? How dare the teachers make them take time away from “learning”?

Parents and teachers seem to be pleased that their children are learning gardening when they perceive that it is reviving a valuable tradition that is in danger of being lost, probably because they or their people have had some good experiences of growing food. But some parents, teachers, and children see only oppression and exploitation in agricultural work, because that is what they or their people have experienced. And a white woman who has always had the option of not growing food, I feel that I need to listen deeply in order to understand the diverse meanings gardening has for people.

*It is worth noting that research has shown that children involved in school gardening projects actually learn better in all subject areas, not just those associated with the garden.
Given the legacy of slavery, sharecropping, and farm labor in this country, one of my African-American friends was appalled when she heard that African-American children were being forced to work in gardens even when they didn’t want to (in some places, it is required as part of their school curriculum). One day, I saw just how real this history is for the children when an African-American boy who hated being in the garden was instructed by a white teacher to pull weeds. Even though I know that teachers are always in the position of telling children to do things they don’t want to do, I felt uncomfortable seeing a black person being told by a white person to work the soil. Just then, two girls walked by and taunted, “Slave!”

And yet. There are countless examples of African-American youth (and children of every ethnic background) who started off hating dirt, but after a time, became proud of every vegetable they grew and ardent in their care of the garden. One solution to the problem of their initial distaste for working the land would be to avoid those situations in which we are reminded of the painful legacy of slavery or other forms of exploitation. But another strategy is to face it.

Shyam Charaka, founder of the Strong Roots gardening program, which works primarily with African-American youth, talks about “restoring African Americans to the lost agricultural heritage which is rightfully theirs.” This heritage has to do with learning about nutritional, traditional African-American food crops, such as sweet potatoes, peanuts, and many types of greens. It is about honoring and connecting with ancestors and elders who offer a positive perspective on the values and traditions of African-American culture, as well as agricultural knowledge. It is about the right to own land and the hope for economic power and self-sufficiency. Asian Americans, European Americans, and Latino Americans can also take pride and pleasure in their people’s agricultural wisdom and skills, despite the history of exploitation and poverty that is so often the reality of people who work the land.

A sense of connection to the earth is every human’s birthright. The fact that oppression has caused many people to feel disconnected from growing food is a tragedy. Gardening is a pleasure for some people, but for others it is a reminder of a traumatic past.

We know quite a lot about how to value cultural differences and how to heal traumatic wounds. Although the garden has many negative associations, both with past evils and with current values, it also has the potential to heal some of those wounds. But for the garden to be healing, it takes more than the nurturing power of soil and sun and growing things.

The garden can be a place where self-respect grows, and students who may not do well in the classroom can have a new chance in a different context. The garden can be a haven where no one is ever shamed. Everyone can slow down. We can learn to listen with respect to children’s ideas, validate their feelings, and tell the truth about the history of our peoples. . . . There are many paths to healing and always, you gotta have heart.

**YOU GOTTA HAVE HEART**

**H**istory is a key. Almost every race and culture has a history in which knowing how to work with the earth to grow food was considered an act of intelligence and an important spiritual activity, as well as a matter of survival. Our mission as garden educators is to help children recover that age-old wisdom for themselves.

**E**arth knowledge is valuable. In this age of technology and speed, it is important to offer students compelling reasons to value traditional practices such as gardening and cooking.

**A**rt and Creativity are for everyone. It is necessary to give students a significant role in creative discussions and decision-making. Gardening is an art as well as a science. If "experts" design the garden, decide what to plant, and when and where, etc., the students are much more likely to see their role as unpaid labor, rather than feeling a sense of pride and ownership as gardeners.

**R**espect each person’s story. Listen with respect to the reasons children give for liking and disliking garden work. Look for and validate the connections with their people’s histories.

**T**estify to the value of cultural identity and the wrongness of oppression. Take an active role in helping people think about how issues of race and culture impact students’ experiences in the garden. Always look for ways to be an ally to others who are raising these issues, and for allies to support you when you do this work.