



# The Acorn

Issue 23 – Winter 2023: Expanding our Reach

A newsletter for members, friends, and family of White Oak Farm

## Growing New Partnerships

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This Spring White Oak Farm expanded our School Garden Program to include a new partnership with the Life Skills Class at Hidden Valley High School in Murphy, OR. Besides the excitement of our first venture into our local high school, there are a multitude of things that make this a special partnership that has deeply enriched not only the students' lives, but also our program and my own experience as an educator.

Walking into the Life Skills Classroom can be an unexpected journey. It is the homeroom for 15-20 students with a range of special needs including autism, cerebral palsy and Down Syndrome. The class is a place for students to develop a wide range of practical skills and experiences to help them navigate the world after high school. There is a commercial kitchen in the classroom with pots bubbling away and students from the broader school community serving up a rotating menu of fresh foods from tacos to roasted chicken and mashed potatoes. The teacher, Dennis Decasas, loves food. Besides running his classroom, he also makes 25 weekly boxes of food for the Hidden Valley Life Skills Food Pantry, which the students put together and deliver to families in need. Since food is such a big part of the classroom, offering garden-based education is a natural and complementary addition to the students' experience.

Each week I lead our garden program at Hidden Valley with another new and amazing partner, Annie Rupp of Raptor Creek Farm and the Josephine County Food Bank. We begin our day by bringing students out to the garden to do hands-on projects. One of the goals of the program is to grow enough produce for the Food Pantry boxes, so experiential education is also real and important work. This Spring students planted vegetable starts from White Oak and Raptor Creek including: tomatoes, tomatillos, summer squash, garlic, lettuce, spinach, hot peppers, cucumbers, and kale.

Over the summer and into the fall there was a plethora of veggies in the garden, and this fall we harvested weekly to provide for the kitchen and the Food Pantry. The Farm also contributed our own fresh-grown organic grapes, apples, greens, and winter squash to the boxes and the kitchen, helping to get even more healthy food to families in the local community.

The students who come out weekly to the garden have a wide range of special needs, and it has been incredible and humbling to work with them. One of our students is in a wheelchair, and she has helped unload trucks of compost, wheelbarrow debris around the garden and prune. "I got it!" is her signature phrase while hard at work. There is nothing she will not try to help us with, and it is pretty amazing. She has taught me that with confidence and motivation, you can do most anything. Teaching and working with all the students, I have learned as an educator to move slower, listen carefully and patiently, and gently encourage them to try new things. Tasting unfamiliar foods can be a big challenge for many of these students (and kids in general!) Recently, I brought in a juicer and carrots, apples, kale and celery from the Farm. We made juice and gave it a try - which was a big achievement. We even juiced enough to hand out to all the students, teachers and staff who passed through the classroom during the rest of the day. I also like to bring drills and hammers to the garden so we can do light construction projects. The students have a wide range of abilities, and it has been a great learning experience for them to help each other drill, hammer and saw.

One of the lessons I have learned this year working with the class is that human potential is amazing. Life skills for a special-needs teenager is not only washing dishes or making it to class on time. It is also believing in yourself that you can do these things. It is a life skill we all need, and I am so grateful to get to share this journey with all the students and staff at Hidden Valley High School for many years to come.



Nathan with a fresh-dug potato (left)  
Jamie watering in the greenhouse (above)