The Revitalization of Parkway School Garden
By Sandra Tougnon

Agriculture interns: Sinella Caban, Jocelyn Mann, and Molly Farrell, and marketing interns: Sandra Tougnon and Michelle Tran, learning more about the Parkway garden from Kirsten Saylor.

It's incredible to see a place that was once an area of comfort and hope for me turn into a beautiful learning space for classrooms. Parkway Montessori and Community School garden is where I used to run and laugh with my closest friends. Now, coming back for the first time as an upcoming graduate, it's impressive to see that this place has become an astonishing garden. It's amazing to see food-based education implemented in a fun, engaging way. School gardens expose students to new foods, and that knowledge can be shared with their families when students bring home the food they've grown. Gardens can also expose students to careers in the food industry and may lead to environmental stewardship.

As part of the SPPS Grow Our Own internship, the Nutrition Services team visited the Parkway garden to better understand the meaningful work behind maintaining school gardens. Through working in this garden, students and staff will increase their understanding of food production and nutrition. With the support of the Cargill grant, SPPS efforts, and community support, student interns and agriculture instructors have been working hard to renew Parkway’s garden this summer.

Picture the crew in hot sunny weather, performing heavy lifting, and getting their hands dirty, only one thing on their mind: the future of this garden. Interns and staff worked diligently at weeding, direct seeding, adding on to the existing compost, and removing deteriorating infrastructure. Additionally, they've grown what the Grow Our Own Coordinator Kirsten Saylor describes as “power greens”. The
parkway garden has mustard greens, and collards, beets, bok choy, cabbage, curly parsley, basil, tomatoes, peppers, and green onions.

“All gardens need to be rehabilitated at some point,” says Kristen Saylor. The rehabilitation of this space led to the removal of several plant beds because they are no longer considered standard height for growing food or have deteriorated. Wooden beds have many cool features but then fall apart over time as they go back to nature. To replace the space that held the beds, the team planted grass seeds to protect the soil from erosion.

The agriculture team is excited to be a part of a new experiment that aims to help local farmers. They’ve partnered with the University of Minnesota Twin Cities and Hennepin County Extension Program to test the effectiveness of cardboard mulch by utilizing the mulch in several plant beds. Mulch plays a vital role as it helps prevent the soil from drying out, retains water, and suppresses weeds. The team is testing out the mulch to see if it works and whether it should be distributed.

Navigating an unfamiliar garden can be challenging. That's why in preparation for the garden openings, the team is working on informational QR code signs for each plant. When scanning the code, it will direct you to a website that reveals background information such as the plant’s features, recipes, nutrition facts, scientific name, growing conditions, place of origin and videos. Notably, an enjoyable extension that will bring engagement and learning, “it's a fun way for people to learn,” Jocelyn Mann enthusiastically stated.

Our time there mainly consisted of harvesting the ripened vegetables which we prepared into stir fry for lunch, and which is precisely the vision for these school gardens. SPPS nutrition wants students to learn firsthand where food comes from by growing, preserving, harvesting, preparing, and implementing these fresh foods into the cafeteria for various nutritious options.

Once the school comes back in session for the fall, the outreach will drive community support. “This is amazing!” Molly LaFay, a Parkway teacher, joyfully commented when visiting the garden. I agree, I can't wait to update you at the end of the renewal. In the meantime, keep an eye out for the next post containing a thrilling behind-the-scenes component!