

## Learning from the Land

Courtesy Farm to School BC

AN INTERVIEW WITH FARM TO SCHOOL BC, A PROGRAM RUN BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF BC

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This past summer, I learned that one of my favourite Instagrammers – @queerbrownvegan – had begun a journey to reconnect with his heritage by learning about local fauna and foraging for food. My view of the world began to morph as I absorbed this new information: how brilliant would it be to go out into the modern world, and identify food at your local park? The idea of becoming a walking encyclopedia of

Pacific Northwest flora and fauna was alluring, and trail walks with my dog became expeditions of 'I Spy'. I would scan the forest floor for the ochre tendrils of chanterelle and continue my assessment of fallen, decomposing trees, hoping to see the yellow shelf of a chicken-of-the-woods. However, I usually left with more questions than answers: what were those tiny mushrooms that looked like a baby jellyfish?

by  
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Walking one day, I finally spotted something I could identify. "Witches Butter!" I cried out, running over to the trunk of a fallen tree to admire the orange jelly mushroom that looked as though it had bubbled out between the lips of bark. I felt that I actually knew something about the regional habitat in which I lived, and I felt a connection to the forest.

There was a missing link that I hadn't made on my own – why did it feel so powerful to be able to identify that mushroom in Pacific Spirit Park? My conversations with Farm to School BC led me to understand my own relationships with the land and place more deeply, and it is encouraging to know the next generation of K-12 learners will benefit from this niche education model.

Encouraging the development of food literacy, healthy eating, connections to environment, and community relationships is the 'business' of Farm to School BC. They support BC schools and districts, providing the knowledge, connections, and programs for schools to start projects that include gardens, indoor microgreen towers, salad bars, seasonal learning activities, and beekeeping.

The Farm to School movement began originally in the United States during the late 1990s as a response to the rising level of processed and unhealthy foods in school cafeterias. In 2007, Farm to School BC was established as a program administered by the Public Health Association of BC; in recognizing that BC is diverse in geography, needs, and interests, the program was built with a focus on food literacy education and healthy eating that could be adaptable to a local context.

"STORYTELLING IS SO POWERFUL. IT'S A BIG PART OF THE CURRICULUM, BUT IT'S ALSO A HUGE PART OF PART OF ORAL HISTORY. HUMANS LIKE STORIES, SO LET'S SHARE THEM! WE HAVE A STORY FOR EACH OF THE LESSONS, AND I THINK IT REALLY BRINGS THESE IDEAS TO LIFE"

# FARM TO SCHOOL BC REGIONAL HUBS

## Capital Region

SD 61, 62, 63, 64

## Central Island Region

SD 68, 69, 70

## Kamloops Region

SD 73, 83

## Northwest Region

SD 52, 54, 82

## North Central Region

SD 28, 57, 91

## Lower Sunshine Coast

SD 46 – pilot

## Surrey Region

SD 36

## Vancouver Area Region

SD 38, 39, 44, 45, 48

If you reside outside of any school districts that are not a part of the Farm to School BC Regional hubs, you can still access grants, food literacy resources, and virtual workshop opportunities through the program. To find out more, go to [www.farmtoschoolbc.ca](http://www.farmtoschoolbc.ca).

## ***About the Farm to School BC Program***

Farm to School BC is a program that brings healthy, local and sustainable food into schools across British Columbia and provides students with hands-on learning opportunities that develop food literacy, all while strengthening the local food system and enhancing school and community connectedness.

“The Farm to School BC model helps bring children and communities together. We form relationships by doing what's tried and true – being visible and present in school communities. One of the ways we achieve this is by having Community Animators in Regional Hubs across the province. These Community Animations live and work in the communities they serve.

“Currently, there are eight regional hubs across the province servicing multiple school districts, including public, independent, and First Nation schools. The Community Animators are the connective tissue between the schools, community, and broader network. That's really where the flexible adaptive model of Farm to School BC comes into play: we recognize that in order for any program to be successful, it has to be locally adapted, and the sense of ownership has to be strongly embedded within the school and the broader community.

“Community Animators are in the communities, building relationships – whether it is through one-on-one conversations in the school hallway, having coffee with a community member, or showing up at a local farm. Those connections that you build can help spark new and exciting projects if there's a grant opportunity that comes up in the local community; the Community Animator is tapped into all the right stakeholders. ”

**Richard Han, Farm to School BC Provincial Manager**

“A key way Farm to School BC Community Animators develop relationships and stay connected to the local community is through regional Farm to School BC Advisory Committees. These Advisory Committees include local stakeholders interested in healthy, local food and often include non-profits, farmers, public health dietitians, and school staff. The Advisory Committee helps identify community needs and opportunities and guides planning and decision-making. ”

**Marcus Lobb, Capitol Region Community Animator & Team Lead**

## FARM TO SCHOOL BC LEARNED FROM INTERVIEWS WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY MEMBERS THAT THEY FOUND IT, “IMPORTANT TO SEE LAND RECLAIMED.”

Food is our great connector, and at Farm to School BC, they see it as a way to bring together all aspects of curriculum to form positive relationships between K-12 students and food.

Aaren Topley, former Capital Region Community Animator explains, “We work with teachers to find ways they can embed food into all areas of learning. Our goal is for students to enact healthy lifestyles once they graduate. Through Farm to School BC, students learn where their food comes from; how to connect with the land; and how to grow, prepare, and eat food in ways that are good for them, and their families.”

Recognizing the need for programming that both inspires and supports educators to connect students to the land, Farm to School BC started with the idea of showcasing Indigenous plant pedagogy projects that were already happening in BC schools. This led to two projects that engaged with this type of teaching – Harvest4Knowledge running out of the Greater Victoria School District, and the Indigenous Foodscapes projects from the Vancouver School Board. Initiating these two projects was just the starting point.

Farm to School BC wanted to highlight Indigenous-led programming, so they collaborated with Indigenous elders and representatives, Indigenous Education Departments, and teachers across the province. After many years of implementing land-based projects, they shared their journey and lessons through the Learning from the Land Toolkit.

The Learning from the Land Toolkit is a written compilation of resources and stories highlighting programs related to Indigenous plants and pedagogy within schools located in what is colonially known today as British Columbia. It provides specific lesson plans for K-12 students, with direct curriculum connections that go beyond traditional learning guides and create a tangible way for schools to integrate the First Peoples Principles of Learning into classrooms. Each lesson plan is about 45 minutes and connects educators and students to the land through stories and teachings about native plants, preservation techniques, and traditional territories. Addie de Candole, the Food Literacy Advisor with Farm to School BC, expressed her passion about connection. “We really wanted to showcase thinking about territory acknowledgments in a real, meaningful way. I think storytelling is so powerful: it’s a big part



Courtesy Farm to School BC

# PROGRAMS

## In the garden – In your schoolyard

school and community gardens  
greenhouses  
beekeeping

## In the classroom

indoor grow stations  
tower gardens  
microgreens



## On the land – Beyond your schoolyard

farm visits  
foraging  
Indigenous plant walks

## In the kitchen

cooking classes  
salad bar  
food preservation



of the curriculum, but it's also a huge part of part of oral history. Humans like stories, so let's share them! We have a story for each of the lessons, and I think it really brings these ideas to life, and students can learn more about the land that they live on as well as different parts of the province."

The Learning from the Land Toolkit supports the work of educators in creating direct action to make their classrooms and schools places of reconciliation. Farm to School BC learned from listening to Indigenous community members that they found it, "important to see land reclaimed."

When a school decides to commit to this process, it is an ongoing journey to forge a deeper connection to community and land. To start, a school may talk to their District Principal of Indigenous Education to support consultation with



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Courtesy Amy Lynn Grover on Unsplash

Indigenous community members about the creation of a garden that would include plants native to the area. Outreach to the local Farm to School BC Community Animator is an invaluable tool for support and further connections.

Aaren Topley talked about those connections:

*“When a school in the Greater Victoria School District was ready to build their school garden, Farm to School BC connected with the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations to talk to elders from those nations about the garden. The elders from those nations came to the school and blessed the land, which was an important protocol before disturbing the land or breaking ground. This can be powerful for students and staff to witness, and is very important for respecting First Nations.*

*“Elder Mary-Anne Thomas did a land blessing with a group of students that would be most engaged with the project. Afterwards, the teacher asked the students what they remembered from the blessing. The students told the teacher that they remembered her calling them ‘little flowers’, in the Lekwungen language.*

*“There were both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students present at the land blessing. When echinacea was being planted, one of the non-Indigenous children reflected on how his grandma used to give that to him from her garden for sports injuries.*

*“Both of these stories show that learning from plants and from the land goes deep – we all have oral histories that we can share, and we build stronger relations when we do share them.”*

When a school can gather the resources to build a garden featuring Indigenous plants or to organize a foraging tour, it creates an opportunity for new community relationships, and allows students to initiate a relationship with plants that are native to the region, and gain a new feeling of comfort and respect in being on the land. This feeling of connection

translates to understanding the history, present, and future of the land, encompassing not only the nature that has occupied it, but the people who live or have lived there.

When a school leader starts to calculate how much square footage needs to be allocated for a new school garden, or stresses about finding a builder to construct raised-beds, it’s important to take a moment to consider the ultimate learning objectives for the school community. Aaren Topley offers a reminder: “In our western mindset, we think of success in terms like: did you build something? What did that look like? Really, if we’re trying to achieve success, it is measured in relationships.”

A commitment to this project and the construction of a garden is a physical enactment of reconciliation. Just like the continual learning we all must commit to, the physical representation of that commitment needs to be cared for in the same way through a plan for maintenance, harvesting, and watering throughout the year. While there are complexities, the rewards of the learning last a lifetime.

Now, I better understand why recognizing Witches Butter filled me with joy. It was a sense of wonder that the forest could produce a colourful fungus that the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl̓ilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples have enjoyed for generations. There is so much for us to learn alongside our students.

To learn more about the Learning from the Land Toolkit and the other programs Farm to School BC offers, visit them at:

[FARMtoschoolBC.ca](http://FARMtoschoolBC.ca)

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