

A JUICY LESSON

Students tending to the school garden give tomatoes another try.

Two years ago, 6-year-old Alex Rosano wouldn't touch a tomato or anything made with tomatoes. To her pleading parents, she said, "Do I really have to?" But when she started tending tomato plants in the school garden at Mountaintop Montessori in Charlottesville, she had a real come-to-tomato epiphany.

The Brandywine, Persimmon, Big Boy, and Arkansas Traveler tomatoes grown at Mountaintop are just part of the 6,000-square-foot garden, which along with a geodesic dome greenhouse, chicken coop, bee hives, and tilapia tank, serve as an outdoor classroom where students work and learn three mornings a week. The harvest is then served for lunch, which is where Rosano discovered her newfound craving for tomato sauce. "There was something so different about the flavor," she says. "And I really liked the texture."

But many of the tomatoes ripen during summer break, so how do the students keep the garden growing? Kids at Mountaintop's SEED (Summer of Ecological Exploration and Discovery) camp continue to tend the plants, tying up vines and inserting teepee stakes. Then when it's time to harvest, they haul bushel baskets of tomatoes to the school kitchen, where they chop them for salsa, gazpacho, salads, and of course, sauce. More than 50 campers enjoy the spoils, but they always have leftovers that are stashed in the freezer for the next school year – to feed tomato-loving kids like Rosano and hopefully convince all of those naysayers to give tomatoes another try.

– Angel Sands Gunn

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