Former first lady Michelle Obama famously planted a vegetable garden at the White House to model good eating to youngsters. Famous restauranteurs such as Alice Waters have been involved in school garden projects for years. These garden programs feel good but now there is evidence that they may, in fact, do good.

A study soon to be published in Preventive Medicine found that students who grow vegetables in a school garden report increased availability of fruits and vegetables at home, particularly the youngest students. The study results were previewed by Journalist’s Resources, a project of the Harvard Kennedy’s School which curates scholarly studies and reports and makes them available on an open-access site.

Researchers at four universities—Cornell, Washington State, Iowa State and Arkansas—carried out a randomized, controlled trial between 2011 and 2013 involving almost 3,000 students at 46 elementary schools in Ark., Iowa, N.Y., and Wash. where at least half the students were eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Randomized, controlled trials are the gold-standard for research.

Half the schools received garden kits and curriculum materials and the other half did not. During the three-year study period researchers followed how well the study schools implemented the garden project, what they called garden intervention fidelity.

The researchers found a link between the school garden programs and fruit and vegetable availability at home, specifically:

- Home availability of low-fat vegetables (those with no added fat, unlike potato salad or coleslaw) increased more among the children exposed to the school gardens than the control group (the average addition equaled 0.64 vegetables). This effect was more pronounced for younger children.
- Children at schools with higher garden intervention fidelity reported significantly more fruit available at home.
- Garden intervention fidelity also had significant effects on home availability of fruit and low-fat vegetables for younger children (in grades 2 to 3), but not for older children (in grades 4 to 6). The researchers interpret this finding to indicate that “behavior interventions in early elementary school may be more potent than those implemented later.”

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