

Slow Food USA – July 28, 2015: School Garden Webinar: Chickens and School Gardens

Facilitator: Lauren Howe, Manager of Slow Food USA's National School Garden Program

Guest presenter: Kim Aman of Moss Haven Elementary School, Dallas, TX

• Can you tell us about the vision behind Moss Haven Farm?

- Kim "Farmer" Aman was a special education teacher for 29 years, then turned farmer
- Moss Haven Farm started 3 years ago. The school exists on a space that used to be a farm, so it was an initiative to bring in the history of the place. Being outside with kids is really important, so they decided to build a farm for kids to be involved.
- Moss Haven partnered with the American Heart Association (is an AHA Teaching Garden), Whole Kids Foundation (Whole Foods,) and United Way, organizations that shared the school's passion for nutrition, health and chickens!

• What inspired you to get chickens?

- Chickens are great pets. By talking with local experts, Kim and the rest of her chicken enthusiasts found out the benefits of having chickens as tools for learning. They would have to teach kids how to hold them, but first they'd need to hold them themselves.

• Did you create a chicken committee?

- At first, Kim was told "No chickens." So she focused on the garden. After one year of a successful school garden, she tried again. People were impressed by the garden, community-wide, so she started to reach out to gain support for the addition of chickens. That is how she started her base.
- To build a support structure, Kim and her team reached out into the community and nationwide. They formed a community of support, did research, talked to specialists. Then they held Town Hall meeting- there was a lot of people who hated the idea of chickens in the school. Nobody showed up to the town hall meeting, which allowed them to go ahead with the project.
- What is MOST IMPORTANT, and what you need to do first is RESEARCH. First and foremost, find out the city code/ordinances. Some cities do not allow chickens, some do not allow roosters, some have designations on space. Once you have figured out the city code, make a plan for the space. Does it have appropriate shade? What is it close to? Square-footage/chicken? Find a veterinarian for when chickens get sick. Lastly, have an exit plan. Be sure to know what the school will do if the program does not work.

• What kinds of meetings, presentations, or processes did you go through?

- The school is not going to fund the chicken program, most likely. In order to find support elsewhere, reach out with meetings, presentations, but FIRST have your research done.
- The last step was the Town Hall meeting. In Moss Haven's case, six people showed up. Five were chicken supporters. There was a farmer that sold chickens, someone from the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, etc. If you have a Town Hall meeting, bring chicken supporters!

• Who did you have to discuss with? (Administration, facilities, etc.)

- You must talk to everyone involved. You will have to talk to the administration, faculty and the school district. The principal was on their chicken committee. Make sure that every detail is included in the proposal you send to the school district. Moss Haven was told no at first, they had to prepare data and information to support the chicken plan before the district agreed. Now there are four other schools in the district that have chickens.

- **What role did community partners play?**
 - Community partners act as support structures. The community will help maintain the chicken coop and the school garden, and the idea might spread. In Moss Haven's case, many families built their own home chicken coops, it was an idea that caught on.
- **Are the chickens accepted by the rest of the school community?**
 - Yes, although not at first, now everyone supports the chickens. The chickens are rock stars. There are birthday parties around the coop, families visit them on the weekend. The chickens are well celebrated.
- **Did any administrators, parents or neighbors object?**
 - Yes, at first there were plenty of people that objected, but now that the plan is in place, no one does.
- **Was it expensive to implement?**
 - Moss Haven got a coop donated by a neighbor, as well as the chickens. The coop was small so they built an enclosure around it. The enclosure allows for the chickens to go out of their coop without going too far. Originally, they were thinking that they would design a coop from recycled material. The price of that coop was \$2,000-\$3,000. They would have paid for the coop with money from a grant.
- **How did you fundraise?**
 - Because the school will not fund the chicken project, fundraising is so important. Be creative with your fundraisers. There are many grants available, (Whole Kids Foundation School Garden Grant, for example, opens their grant application on September 1st.) Look for grants that support building gardens, sustainability or healthy kids programs. Moss Haven has a weekly Kool Aid stand. They did a letter-drop campaign, bake sales, mother's day events. Moss Haven also applied for 5013(c) status. Fundraising is an ongoing project.
- **How did you decide your coop style/type?**
 - The Moss Haven coop was donated. They built an enclosure around the coop so that the chickens could go out. They also built an enclosure large enough for an entire class to visit the chickens in. Moss Haven uses mulch under the chicken coop.
- **Did you consider a mobile chicken coop?**
 - A mobile coop was not big enough. Moss Haven has a "chicken tractor" that allows them to bring a couple chickens out at a time to graze because chickens love grass.
- **How did you choose the location of the coop?**
 - Location is very important. In Texas, the chickens need shade. Moss Haven also picked a location close to the compost bin. The chickens' bedding is great for the compost, it heats it up.
- **Which breeds did you choose and why?**
 - Kim picked good egg-layers and docile breeds that would be good around kids. City code does not allow roosters. Moss Haven has Americanas, (nicknamed "easter egg layers"- green and blue color eggs, very consistent layers), New Hampshire Reds (an Ark of Taste breed,) and Polish chickens (for the cute factor). They chose breeds based on the recommendations of agricultural professionals and the farmer that brings them to market.

Is there automatic feeding and watering?

- No, there are big feed buckets to fill every 3-4 days. Water is changed based on the season. During the summer water must be changed morning and night. Chickens do not like it too hot.
- **Who takes care of the chickens during the summer?**
 - Families and Kim visit chickens during the summer. Families sign up, its like concert tickets, the slots go so fast. Moss Haven has one family take care of the farm and one take care of the chickens. Slots change weekly or monthly. And the family that signs up gets the added benefit of taking home the produce or the eggs.
 - The chickens are also spending some time at a Master Gardeners' farm during the summer.
 - Moss Haven uses Sign-up Genius to create the sign-up sheet. Sign-Up Genius is a great online system for managing and communicating with volunteers.
- **How are the eggs used? (home, sales, cafeteria etc.)**
 - It depends on how the chickens are laying. At times the eggs were given as a reward for members of the farm club or to teachers. They can also be used in lessons. Now, Moss Haven does a once a month pop-up market. They sell the eggs for \$1 each. It is a great lesson about supply and demand because the kids and families really want the eggs.
- **How are the kids involved (e.g. cleaning/maintenance, feeding, eggs)?**
 - Older kids are in charge of the cleaning and maintenance of the coop on Fridays. There is some training involved, so Kim recommends these tasks for 5th and 6th graders. Some students feed the chickens on the way to the compost bin with the food scraps from the cafeteria. Moss Haven collects compostable food scraps from the cafeteria, which is a great lesson to children about waste and recycling. Other students let chickens out every morning. They get training on how to do this and receive service hours in return.
 - There is also a Farm Club that meets after school. They do maintenance and attend to watering etc.
- **During or before/after the school day? Extracurricular club?**
 - All of the above. Farm Club is great for students that are especially interested.
- **What kind of education/lesson planning is involved with the chickens? Involving teachers, curriculum and academic standards?**
 - Kids should always be supervised with the chickens. The coop can be used in many different lesson plans and curricula. Moss Haven has Master Gardeners on the farm days. They create a rotation around the farm, each with a different lesson. The teachers also create lessons. Every six weeks they have farm days. They've taught the students about caring for animals, problems with chickens, the chicken and the egg cycle, chicken phrases, pecking order, etc. You can connect anything, from any discipline, to chickens or gardens. Do something different each time to keep it interesting. The kids look forward to these days.
 - Moss Haven cracked one of their chicken eggs next to a grocery store egg as a demonstration. There was a big difference in color and appearance, made a huge impression on the kids.
 - Special Ed Students: At Moss Haven, these students let chickens out in the morning. It teaches them responsibility. The chickens teach them to connect with animals, care for them, it builds their confidence and success, makes them feel in charge. Chickens level the playing field, it is a hands-on lesson, some kids that don't thrive in the classroom, thrive in the farm and that is important to help kids find how they like to learn.

- **Are there any issues with food safety or hygiene?**
 - Hand washing and sanitizing is very important. There is a hand-washing station set up outside of the coop and kids have to wash before and after entering. The kids are more of a health threat to the chickens than the chickens to the kids.
 - When you collect the eggs they do not need to be refrigerated until they are washed, so the eggs will last a while (up to around 2 weeks).
 - Moss Haven had an incident with Poultry Lice. They used it as an education tool, told everyone that the poultry lice like chickens not human hair. It was easy to treat. With problems like that, you must be up front and informative.
- **What protocols/processes were necessary? Who did you partner with to write the protocols?**
 - Moss Haven partnered with a garden center, agricultural professionals from extension and Master Gardeners, and the local Ace hardware store. Find resources that are knowledgeable about the project you are undertaking to help you. The protocols Kim wrote are on the Slow Food website:
<http://gardens.slowfoodusa.org/contents/sdownload/3590/file/Chickens-School-Garden-Protocols-Moss-Haven-Elementary-Dallas-Texas.pdf>
- **What happens if a chicken gets sick?**
 - It is very sad when a chicken gets sick. You can see it in their eyes. When you see one is sick, separate it and call the vet. It may be \$10 to buy a chicken but it is \$125 to take them to the vet. There is not a very good recovery rate for chickens. When the chicken dies, teach life cycles to the children. Death should be handled by talking about it, as kids have built relationships with the chickens. It is very sad but it is also a part of life.
 - One of our parent volunteers is also a veterinarian, so we consult with her
- **Most important take-aways from your chicken journey? Best resources you tapped into? Last pieces of advice would you give schools looking to get their own chickens?**
 - Jump in. If you want to start a chicken program, collect the information, go through the process. It is all about learning through trial and error. That is why having a network of resources is so important. Chicken people always want to help out. Backyardchickens.com, 4H club, agricultural extension office, Master Gardeners, all great resources for chicken questions. Make connections! It is everything to creating a successful program. There are lots of people out there that want to help.
 - Moss Haven is organizing a coop tour that will give tours of all the coops in the community. This helps people share ideas. Get the word out, the community will rally around you.

On the Slow Food USA School Garden website:

- “A Flock of Feathered Friends at Moss Haven Farm” blog entry by Kim Aman
<http://gardens.slowfoodusa.org/article/a-flock-of-feathered-friends-at-moss-haven-farm>
- Chicken Protocols:
<http://gardens.slowfoodusa.org/contents/sdownload/3590/file/Chickens-School-Garden-Protocols-Moss-Haven-Elementary-Dallas-Texas.pdf>