

| FEATURE |

# Coastal Roots Farm Goes Digital with their Virtual School

BY NATHALIE FEINGOLD

Picture rows and rows of diverse, vibrant vegetables; some, like the beets, are shrouded with row covers for their protection, while others, like the corn, reach longingly into the open, azure sky, drinking up the sun. Still, there are others—like the radishes and snap peas—that are snuggled up together in the same planter in what is lovingly referred to as a “companion planting.” In front of each row are signs labeling the various plants in English, Spanish and Hebrew next to a pretty watercolor rendering.

You’re picturing the Coastal Roots Farm educational area—a space dedicated to learning, where they film the majority of their virtual classes.

“Usually, this space is utilized for school programming, so I can come out here and harvest whatever. If I want to show the students a root structure or root system I can pull out a plant and show it to them. We just consider it a learning experience,” Megan Freeman, the Coastal Roots Farm education coordinator, said, “That is what is so amazing about this space—it’s in the heart of our farm and is able to be utilized for learning.”

Coastal Roots Farm is offering six virtual learning programs where children in grades kindergarten through sixth from all over San Diego County have the opportunity to experience and learn from the farm virtually.

“We took our most popular programs and adjusted them to virtual learning. Those programs include pollination, soil, plant parts, chickens and just a general overview of the farm. We decided to focus more on elementary school-age because that was our sweet spot anyways,” Megan explained.

There is also a class for 3rd-6th graders that focuses on food inequality and pursu-

ing justice.

Of course, there are certain things about Coastal Roots Farm’s experiential learning programs that are lost with the switch to virtual programming; however, it also comes with an unexpected silver lining. With online classes, they can reach and connect with a wider audience than ever before.

For example, their first virtual field trip was with a class of special education students. Afterward, the teacher commented that the program provided her students with a safe, comfortable way to experience the farm for the first time.

## Jewish Agricultural Values

Coastal Roots Farm is a Jewish farm that integrates age-old Jewish values into the way that they care for their land and connect with the community. Megan explained that Jewish agricultural values prioritize land, community, giving and justice in a way that resonates with her, even though she is not Jewish.

“Our value is to donate over half of the food that we produce to food-insecure communities, that comes from a Jewish value and the way that we integrate compost and take care of the soil has to do with the Jewish value of not wasting. The way that we take care of our chickens, we have happy, pasteurized chickens, part of that is a Jewish value because we believe that we need to respect all living things,” Megan said.

A farm experience comes with educational, therapeutic and reflective benefits and Megan asserts that being on the farm, even



virtually, provides nourishment—both literally and spiritually.

“Outdoor education is physically nourishing because we expose students to different types of foods that nourish their bodies. We also find that being in nature is spiritually nourishing. Getting away from the hustle and bustle of your everyday life, listening to the birds, getting your hands in the soil and using all your senses is proven to lower anxiety and to help make people feel whole,” Megan said.

The farm can also teach valuable life lessons. For example, Megan recently attempted and ultimately failed to grow carrots over the past six months. Her failure taught her that nature, like many things in life—especially right now—is impossible to control.

“During these times, there’s been a lot of uncertainty, there’s been a loss of control that manifests itself in a lot of valid, intense mental health struggles for many people. I think there’s something beautiful to reflect on the fact that we are trying to interact with something that we can’t control; it’s an important reminder to let go and adapt,” Megan said.

Coastal Roots Farm makes sure to touch on the guiding principles of compassion, responsibility and initiative through their online classes.

Students learn compassion, not just for



each other, but for the tiniest of insects, like worms, bees or spiders, that children often overlook or fear.

“A lot of kids are scared of bees but when you present the whole picture of how they’re so helpful and how we need to take care of them because our livelihood depends on them, you can develop compassion there,” Megan explained, “We have the students observe the bees and see how hard they’re working to create this connection and that’s a way of creating empathy for a living being.”

The students also learn responsibility through caring for plants. Right now, Coastal Roots Farm offers a kit of supplies for students to plant and take care of their plants at home.

And finally, they learn initiative and environmental responsibility.

“If all of us were to say, ‘this is not my problem,’ what would happen? Oftentimes, we present issues and challenges within the food system, but we also present ways in which they can take action to help out the food system and environment,” Megan said.

### **Early Environmental Education**

Megan believes that educating children on the environment and teaching them these life lessons at such a young age is critically important.

“I think by addressing it at a young age it allows for a foundation and it gets incorporated in their baseline knowledge and baseline values as they are developing self-awareness and as they are developing ideas about the world around them,” Megan said.

Megan also emphasized the impact that early education has on the environment.

“We have a huge issue of commodifying and exploiting nature and our resources, and we need to teach people about the fact that this isn’t something that we can just take, take, take from, that we need to give back to it, too. We need to protect it. We need to care about it,” Megan explained. ♡