

Through tending gardens and collecting eggs, ASU alumna teaches kids about food cycles

Frances Craik helms a unique garden program at a Phoenix Montessori school

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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As Frances Craik was cleaning flowers early on a Wednesday morning, one of her students ran over with a surprise: two fresh eggs from the chicken coop.

She walked over with the student to the coop to store the eggs, where she was quickly followed by a dozen more children calling after her, shouting, “Miss Flowers! Miss Flowers!”

It’s a nickname that has stuck since Craik, an Arizona State University alumna, began working at Augustus H. Shaw Jr. Montessori School in Phoenix earlier this year as the garden site manager.

Just off to the side of the school’s building sits a garden that serves more than 500 students and is filled with herbs, vegetables and flowers — not far from a growing orchard of fruit trees and a flock of chickens.

The program has been around for several years and is one of the few schools in the [Phoenix Elementary School District to have a gardening curriculum](#).

It has since been a valuable resource, teaching students where their food comes from as well as the impact of time, patience and consent.

“The Montessori philosophy is very much child-led. The cosmic education philosophy is that the whole world is their classroom,” Craik said. “So having a space where the kids can come and be curious about pollination, soil health and really play an active role in supporting life itself, I feel it

gives them a space to feel human, learn more about themselves and how to interact with one another.”

Inspiring the next generation

Craik graduated from The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2021 with a degree in urban planning, along with a minor in sustainability and a certificate in sustainable food systems.

She chose to go into urban planning because she wanted to work for her community and become a catalyst for positive change — creating more green spaces where people can come together and connect.

Each day, Craik gives herself time to tend to the garden — whether it’s pulling weeds, planting new seeds or laying mulch. From those activities, she builds a curriculum tied to seasonal activities.

Right now, many of the plants are starting to go to seed. Craik then takes those seeds to educate the students about planting, and later they watch the plant go through an entire life cycle, again harvesting more seeds at the end of its life.

She recently planted a [three sisters garden](#) of corn, beans and squash with her middle schoolers, providing an opportunity to teach them about companion planting and Indigenous agriculture.

“I always try to tie cultural and historical lessons into the garden lessons and what we’re actually doing. The three sisters garden is just thriving. The corn, beans and squash will definitely survive through the summer, and we’ll provide lots of food to share with the families,” Craik said.

“I just want (the students) to feel free to be here, inspire their curiosity to learn and to grow. That’s why there are a lot of different things growing here, because it is very much student-led and student-inspired.”

Nurturing career growth through academics

Craik credits her degree from ASU for giving her a bigger picture of understanding environmental systems and practical tools to work with them. Combined with her minor, she can better understand how people interact with land infrastructure and policy together. It has shaped the way she approaches everything from garden design to education.

“Whether I’m teaching seed saving, managing a small farm or designing a learning garden, I’m constantly thinking about how natural systems and human systems interact and how to make those relationships more resilient,” Craik said.

One of the biggest skills she said she took away from her academic journey was the ability to communicate, translating complex environmental concepts into accessible and engaging language that is essential in both teaching and community-based work.

Beyond communication, Craik said she learned research, critical thinking and project management skills that she utilizes every day.

“I built strong research and critical thinking skills, which I've used in everything from heritage grain research to developing educational programs. Project management was another key area, balancing multiple responsibilities, planning long-term projects and adapting when conditions change,” Craik said. “I also developed a comfort with ambiguity and problem-solving fields like agriculture and education. Things rarely go exactly as planned, so being able to think creatively and adjust quickly has been incredibly valuable.”

A good chunk of Craik's ASU experience was virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but because of that, she was able to learn more about infrastructure and policies that shape urban agriculture and sustainable systems.

With this job, Craik hopes to develop herself more as an educator.

“Overall, my career goal is developing myself as a better educator, continuing to learn more about farming and also broadening my scope of having community partnerships,” Craik said.

She also envisions a future that expands the ownership of the garden space, where students and the surrounding community feel that it's a place they can come and learn on their own.

“Being in downtown Phoenix, there is a deep-rooted history of people and families that have lived in this neighborhood. I really want to continue to develop this as an anchor place for the community. To let it be a place of reciprocity, where they can come here and where the school can kind of be out in the community doing good things.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Frances Craik begins her morning talking with young students about the chickens eggs and the fresh eggs they recently laid at their Montessori school. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU

Text image(s)



A morning collection of eggs fresh from the coop at the Augustus H. Shaw Jr. Montessori School.
Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU



Craik prepares flowers for bouquets to bring to a school PTA meeting. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU



Craik poses in the garden at the Augustus H. Shaw Jr. Montessori School in Phoenix. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU