



# Growing food and STEM skills

The Veggie U Hawai'i science program introduces classroom edible gardens to fourth graders

ON A VISIT TO CLEVELAND, OHIO SOME EIGHT YEARS ago, chef Alan Wong was treated to a tour of an innovative school agricultural program called Veggie U. "One of the reasons why we should travel out of the state," Wong says, "is to see what is new and going on outside of it. When we see something of great value that can improve Hawai'i, we should bring it back to Hawai'i." Wong shared his Veggie U experience with Hawai'i Agricultural Foundation (HAF) executive director Denise Yamaguchi, and she ran with it.

According to Veggie U's website, "The impetus of this innovative program came in response to the lack of nutrition education in elementary schools and to combat the onslaught of packaged food marketing to children. Studies have found that children involved in a nutrition program with a gardening component are more likely to make healthy food choices."

The nonprofit created a five-week interdisciplinary curriculum incorporating hands-on plant science with journaling and mathematics; the curriculum is vetted by a third-

party and comes with charts demonstrating how lessons meet all national and state educational standards. Lessons include soil study, composting, vermiculture, plant anatomy and nutrition. Classrooms celebrate the end of the program with a vegetable feast day, sometimes with a celebrity chef leading the class in a cooking lesson.

Veggie U provides participating schools with a complete set of lesson plans and all materials, with costs covered by grants, donors and local businesses.

Yamaguchi has overseen the implementation and growth of the Hawai'i program over the past three years. In the 2013-2014 school year, HAF piloted Veggie U in four schools on three islands: O'ahu, Maui and Kaua'i. The program grew steadily; by the 2015-2016 school year, Veggie U Hawai'i had mushroomed to over 100 classrooms in 44 schools on five islands—now including Moloka'i and the Big Island.

"We initiated the program to incite an interest in kids at an early age to pursue a career in farming and agriculture," says Yamaguchi. "The first group of teachers gave us feed-

back, and we thought it would be useful for all fourth grade classrooms." HAF provides twice annual trainings for teachers joining the program, with 30 to 50 teachers in attendance each time. One value of the program, says Yamaguchi, is that it enables teachers to comply with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics education) standards that are otherwise difficult to meet.

Veggie U Hawai'i is funded by a combination of corporate sponsors and HAF's Localicious restaurant campaign. Participating restaurants display the Localicious insignia on menu items featuring locally grown,

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caught or raised ingredients. Each time a patron orders a Localicious item, the restaurant donates \$1 to the Localicious campaign. Once the restaurant has raised \$500, they're eligible to adopt a new Veggie U classroom. The Localicious goal is to raise \$50,000 each year and broaden the reach of Veggie U to additional fourth grade classrooms statewide. Yamaguchi would like to see the program reach more students on the outer islands.

The fast growth of Veggie U in Hawai'i and the engagement of the students speak to the success of the program. "If we were to inspire a student to become a farmer as a result of this or just a better steward of our resources," says Wong, "I think that would be the ultimate reward." And in the meantime, students are learning how to grow and prepare vegetables they may never have tried before, opening their minds and their diets to new possibilities. ■

Photo courtesy Hawai'i Agricultural Foundation

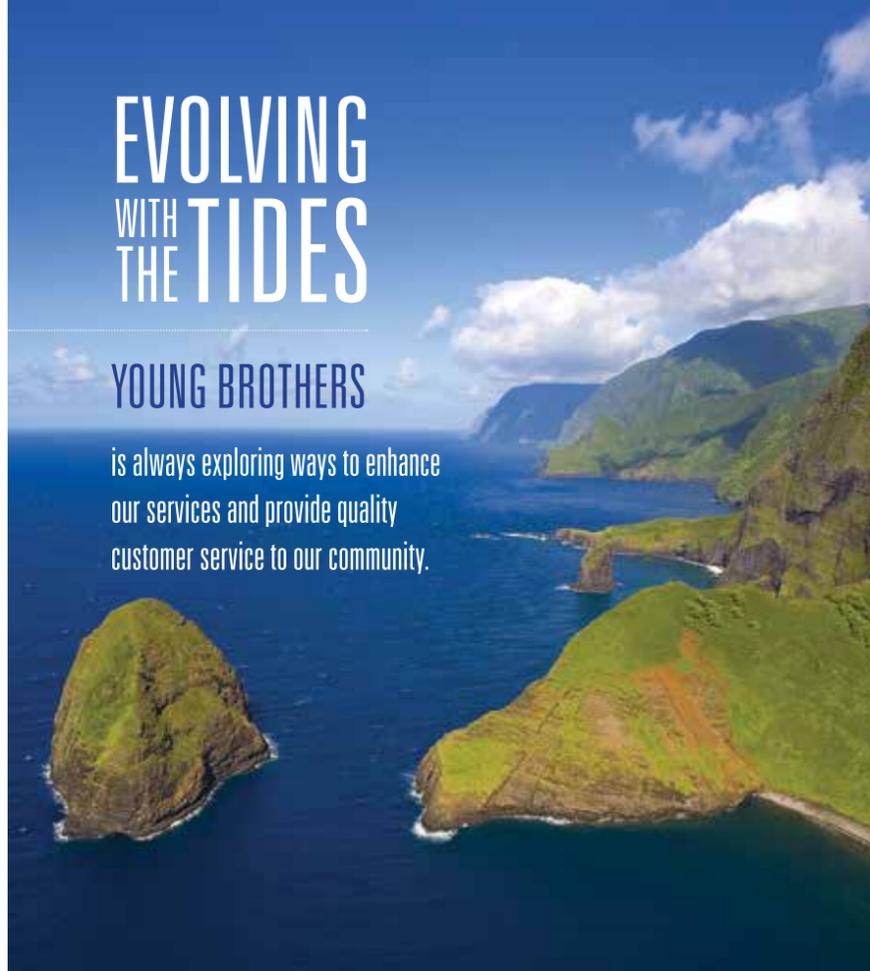


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