



Don't tell these students they're part of a research project. That could spoil the fun they're having digging in the dirt and picking their own vegetables.

Famed cardiologist Arthur Agatston, M.D., wanted to study how to help elementary schools serve more nutritious school lunches and how to teach students about healthy living. So his nonprofit Agatston Research Foundation launched a research project with the participation of four elementary schools in Central Florida: Kissimmee Charter Academy, Mill Creek Elementary, Partin Settlement Elementary, and PM Wells Charter Elementary.

The researchers on the Healthier Options for Public Schoolchildren (HOPS) study worked with the school district's current food provider to offer meals high in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables and reduce simple sugars and processed foods at these four selected schools. They also created a curriculum to teach the children, their parents, teachers, and staff about nutrition.

Dr. Agatston and his team recognized that gardens at the schools would help the students learn firsthand about the joys of growing and eating fresh, wholesome food. They contacted *Organic Gardening*

for help. We provided a planting calendar, information on planting and caring for the garden, and simple-to-assemble raised-bed frames. And we asked gardening product suppliers to donate seeds, tools, and other gear for the students to use.

The researchers are now compiling their data on how the healthy food and nutrition education affect the students' well-being and performance. But even before the numbers are crunched, Danielle Hollar, Ph.D., leader of the Agatston research team, reports that the vegetable crunching has gone well. "When I visited one of the schools

last spring," she tells us, "one of the students came rushing up to me, very excited to tell me the peas had begun producing in the school's garden."

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For more information about the HOPS study, contact Danielle Hollar, Ph.D., at the Agatston Institute, [info@agatstonresearchfoundation.org](mailto:info@agatstonresearchfoundation.org). To start a community garden in your area, call the American Community Gardening Association at 877-275-2242 or visit [communitygarden.org](http://communitygarden.org).

# The Heart Doctor Says...

Arthur Agatston is all about heart. With his new book, *The South Beach Heart Program* (January 2007), the cardiologist and author of the bestselling *South Beach Diet* book series is launching a campaign to change how the medical community assesses cardiac health and, even more important, how all of us take care of our hearts.

## **What do school gardens have to do with cardiac health?**

I wanted to take my ideas beyond the academic journals and conferences where I had been presenting them and put them into practice. Healthy eating habits are very important to my program, and it makes a big difference if those habits develop early in life. So our research team at the Agatston Institute launched a pilot program to introduce healthier foods in school cafeterias. We knew if kids could participate in growing healthy food, they would be more willing to eat it.

## **Your book explains how our eating habits evolved over time. How has this affected what we grow in our gardens?**

Our desire for sweet, salty, fatty foods was a survival mechanism for early humans to find the highest-value foods for their needs. But now our processed foods are loaded with sugars and fats, and are cultivated more for taste and looks than nutrition. We also eat less of a variety of foods. Gardeners should grow and eat as many fruits and vegetables as possible, and with a minimum of

processing. That doesn't mean raw—certain foods, such as carrots, release more nutrients when cooked. But we've found that many kids like raw vegetables better, and that's okay for them.

## **What do you think of gardening as a form of exercise for heart health?**

In my book, I advocate “functional fitness,” meaning exercise you can do as part of your everyday routine. Digging is not just exercising the biceps; it is strengthening the very important “core” muscles. And while gardening does not burn a lot of calories per session, there is enough benefit to manage your weight and keep your heart healthy.

