Teaching History Through a Garden Companion

Slide 1: Native American History:

Growing a three sisters garden of corn, beans, and squash would work well as a tool to understand early agriculture and Native American history. This could be paired with teaching about domestication of plants such as teosinte to maize and the move from hunter-gatherer to more sedentary, agricultural based societies (in some cases). The three sisters were grown throughout North America and as dry goods could be stored throughout the winter. Many Native American groups have their own legends that surround the idea of planting these three crops, which will expose students to different ways of thinking and cultures. This lesson would be great for a social studies class because it can incorporating geography, history, and anthropology. Along with the lesson plan and information on the three sisters, the links here lead to you a site with pictures of Native American artifacts that were used in daily life, an interactive website with dioramas and artifacts, and a website with a few videos (although there may be more interesting ones out there).

Slide 2: Founders of America:

Growing a kitchen garden could help students understand colonial life in America as well as learn about some of the founders of the nation like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson who were involved in gardening themselves. Kitchen gardens in the colonial era were used to supplement food bought at the market and were typically tended by women. However, almost everyone dealt with some aspects of food production at this time whether through farming, raising animals, gardening, or fishing. For many, gardening was a way to transmit heritage and the culture of their ancestors by planting varieties of seeds passed down through generations.
Today some of heirloom varieties still exist, but many have disappeared. Students can browse primary source documents written by Jefferson and Washington about their daily life and their work on gardens and farms. For the garden lesson students can choose from varieties of seeds typically grown in kitchen gardens in the colonial era and keep their own journals documenting the growth of the plants and role-playing what life was like in the colonial era to rely on the “fruits of their own labor” or what it might be like to rely primarily on a kitchen garden in modern day.

Slide 3: Westward Expansion/Homestead on the Prairie:
As settlers moved west into places like Iowa, they encountered a different climate and an entirely different landscape. Students can learn about what it was like to move into the prairie to set up a homestead by growing their own prairie garden or visiting a prairie area like the Tallgrass Prairie Center at UNI. To teach about the history of settling Iowa, visit the Iowa Pathways website through Iowa Public Television to learn about the pioneer experience, sod houses, and life on the farm. Take a look at the Fortepan Iowa website that features photo collections from Iowans with pictures that range from 1860s to the year 2000. Many of these photos are of farms, homesteads, and gardens. Included on this slide is a garden activity to teach about westward expansion along the different trails that settlers took. This lesson compares the foods available to settlers along the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, and the Santa Fe Trail. Through this activity teachers can incorporate lessons on different environments settlers faced during westward expansion and lessons on geography.
World War II:

Through a garden, students can learn about what life was like on the home-front during WWII and the efforts by everyone, including children to cut back on consumption and even grow their own food. Many websites have lesson plans and instructions on how to grow victory gardens in school gardens, and I’ve included a couple links here. Students could read some of the School Garden Army Manuals and look through the WWII poster exhibit and think about what it might be like today if there was a similar movement for children to grow food for the nation.

African American History:

Students could learn about African American History by planting a garden with seeds from the African American Heritage Collection through the D. Landreth Seed Company. They could read about how many of these fruits and vegetables were brought from Africa to America during the slave trade and how even while in slavery many people maintained their own gardens. The PBS website Homecoming covers Black Farming and Land Loss from the period after emancipation, the reconstruction, through modern day and there is also a movie that goes along with the website. Students could also learn about African American history through studying notable people like George Washington Carver, who as a child earned the nickname “the plant doctor” because of his skill nurturing plants in his and his neighbor’s gardens and who later became a botanist and inventor who is credited with inventing peanut butter.