
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**2011: The Year of the Vegetable**

By George Ball
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Childhood obesity is now the nation's disease -- an ailment crippling the body politic. The long-term health effects are well-established and include early onset diabetes and premature hip and joint problems. American children are prematurely aging, suffering from sicknesses that were once the provenance of older adults. Old has become the new young.

The lineup of culprits includes school vending machines, latchkey children, the endangered home-cooked meal, vanishing physical-education classes, fried everything, supersized portions, sedentary hours spent zoned out in front of the computer screen, nutritional ignorance, misleading labeling and more. But whatever and whoever is to blame, it is surely not kids. We cannot expect children to make the right food choices when healthy foods are out of reach and nutrition-smart role models are not in evidence.

The saddest thing about childhood obesity is that it's unnecessary. It's inexcusable that in the breadbasket of the world American children are eating so much lousy food. First lady Michelle Obama's anti-obesity initiative, "Let's Move," represents a welcome beginning to what will have to become a nutritional revolution.

As an agriculturist and horticulturist, I believe that the answer is simple. As parents, educators, nutritionists and marketers, we have to imbue our children with the love of -- and consumption of -- the most beneficial food for growing bodies. This means fresh vegetables and fruits, whether store-bought or home-grown.

As kids, we imitate our elders, who teach most effectively by example. Right now, adults aren't doing a good job of modeling good behavior. According to a recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, just 26% of adults have three or more servings of vegetables a day, a number that includes those who deem a tomato slice or lettuce on a burger as a "vegetable serving." In other words, roughly 80% of U.S. adults scarcely eat any vegetables at all.

Liking vegetables is not a given: Every food other than breast milk is an acquired taste. But children can easily learn to enjoy eating their greens. It's simply a matter of education and familiarity -- as in "family." Children will happily eat squash, artichoke or broccoli, to the delight of the parents who taught them to do so. As for fruits, children can gobble them up, but like vegetables, they must be at the ready, at least as available as all the junky alternatives.

In our research at Atlee Burpee, we have found that kids who grow vegetables alongside their parents eat them regularly and with gusto. Peas, green beans and raw carrots -- the very vegetables that kids are told to eat, their parents' admonishing fingers wagging -- are particular favorites.

While not all American families have the benefit of a sun-filled backyard for a vegetable garden, companies like Burpee offer many vegetable seeds and plants that you can grow easily in containers. You can grow beets, carrots, sweet potatoes and Brussels sprouts, which can be plucked from the stalk well into winter.

Eighteen years ago, as president of the American Horticultural Society, I initiated a children's gardening program. Our annual symposium drew thousands of educators and community gardeners with the goal of educating and inspiring children to grow gardens in their school and neighborhoods. The results were heartening: Thousands of churches, schools and community centers sprouted new gardens.

Yet no single institution is sufficient; fighting a problem of this sort requires a multifaceted effort. Churches could do much more to inspire families to grow vegetables. Public and private botanical and community gardening groups should augment efforts to lure neighbors into their educational demonstration gardens. Most families, whether in the city or suburbs, can plant at least a "starter garden" -- involving pre-teen children in the planting, tending and harvesting.

While the first lady deserves the credit for focusing the nation on childhood obesity, it is an issue that both

political parties can endorse. Vegetables are deliciously nonpartisan.

Let's make 2011 the Year of the Vegetable. We have nothing to lose but our waistlines.

Mr. Ball is chairman of the W. Atlee Burpee Co. and past president of the American Horticultural Society.

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