

Shovel-Ready Project: A White House Garden

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For more than a decade, food activists have rallied, cajoled, even pleaded for a vegetable garden on the White House lawn. Now they're finally going to get it.

Today, first lady Michelle Obama will host a groundbreaking for a White House kitchen garden on the South Lawn. She will be joined by students from Bancroft Elementary in Northwest Washington, whose participation in the project will continue past today, as they help with planting in the coming weeks and harvesting later this year.

The 1,100-square-foot garden will include 55 kinds of vegetables, including peppers, spinach and, yes, arugula. (The selection is a wish list put together by White House chefs.) There will also be berries, herbs and two hives for honey that will be tended by a White House carpenter who is also a beekeeper. The chefs will use the produce to feed the first family, as well as for state dinners and other official events.

The White House will use organic seedlings, as well as organic fertilizers and organic insect repellents. The garden will be near the tennis courts and be visible to passersby on the street. The whole Obama family will be involved in tending the garden, White House spokeswoman Katie McCormick Lelyveld said.

Proponents of the garden see the move as a victory for fresh, wholesome food. With the Obamas as role models, it could also be a turning point in their battle to overturn the perception of organic food, farmers markets and gardens as the preserves of the elite.

"Nothing could be more exciting," said Alice Waters, chef of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., who has been lobbying for a garden on the White House lawn since the first Clinton administration. "The symbolism of putting a seed in the ground is a promise of a real nourishment and education for the population who visits, the people who plant the crops and the people who pick from it."

The White House appears to be casting the garden as just another strategy to encourage healthful eating. President Obama famously learned the political perils of being too familiar with "elite" vegetables such as arugula. In several interviews, Michelle Obama has talked about the importance of healthful eating and the challenges of persuading her children to eat fruits and vegetables. But she tends to use words such as fresh and nutritious rather than organic and sustainable. "We want to use it as a point of education," the first lady said in an interview in the April issue of *O* magazine. "We want to talk about health and how delicious it is to eat fresh food, and how you can take that food and make it part of a healthy diet."

The Obamas' garden will not be the first at the White House. John Adams, the first tenant, planted a garden shortly after taking up residence in 1800. Woodrow Wilson brought in sheep to mow and

fertilize the White House lawn in 1918, an effort to conserve resources for the war effort. In 1943, over the objection of the Agriculture Department, Eleanor Roosevelt planted a victory garden, inspiring millions of Americans to grow their own food during World War II.

Recent efforts have been more modest. Jimmy Carter, a Georgia farmer who extolled the virtues of gardening during his campaign, declined calls in 1978 to plant a vegetable garden at the White House. During the Clinton years, a small garden was planted on the roof; the White House rejected the idea of a larger garden on the lawn, saying it was not in keeping with the formal nature of the White House grounds.

Campaigners for the White House garden were pleased but not surprised by the move. Daniel Bowman Simon, who last year drove a school bus with a sustainable garden on its roof across the country to raise awareness for the idea, said in December he had given a presentation to Rethinking Soup, a project that brought together farmers and activists to discuss food issues. Rethinking Soup was organized in part by Sam Kass, who had worked as a private chef for the Obamas and joined the White House kitchen in January. Chez Panisse's Waters said the first lady had been receptive to the idea when the two met last summer. "She said: 'I don't know why we couldn't have one,'" Waters reported. "It seemed like the most natural thing in the world."

Simon and his partner, Casey Gustawarow, called for schoolchildren and disabled Americans to work in the White House garden. They also requested that the gardeners plant heirloom seeds and use compost made from food waste from the kitchens that serve the White House, congressional buildings and Supreme Court.

"This garden is a tremendous idea, one that is both timely and in some ways overdue," said former White House executive chef Walter Scheib. "There has always been a small garden at the White House, but this commitment by Mrs. Obama to local and freshly grown product is a progressive move forward that will raise the profile and awareness of local and sustainable food both at the White House and nationally to an unprecedented level. Chef [Cristeta] Comerford and all of the chef's brigade must be thrilled to have this resource at their disposal. I know I would have been."