The cover of 'The American Gardener' magazine features a close-up photograph of two Hellebore flowers. The flowers have large, dark purple petals with prominent green veins. The centers are bright yellow-green with numerous stamens. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting foliage. The title 'The American GARDENER' is printed in a large, white, serif font at the top. Below it, the subtitle 'The Magazine of the American Horticultural Society' and the issue date 'November / December 2014' are in a smaller white font. The main article title 'Marietta and Ernie O'Byrne's Hellebore Haven' is in a white serif font on the left side. On the bottom right, three article teasers are listed in a white sans-serif font.

The American GARDENER[®]

The Magazine of the American Horticultural Society

November / December 2014

Marietta and Ernie O'Byrne's
Hellebore Haven

A Straw-Bale
Garden Primer

Gardening for
Native Bees

Crapemyrtles for
Smaller Spaces

AHS MEMBERS MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Rick Sherman

by Sarah Miller

STARTING AND running a school garden can be a daunting process, but in Oregon, hundreds of these gardens now have an invaluable network to draw upon—each other. Rick Sherman, the Farm to School and School Garden Program Coordinator for the Oregon Department of Education in Salem, Oregon, oversees this network, providing resources and helping make connections between school garden coordinators.

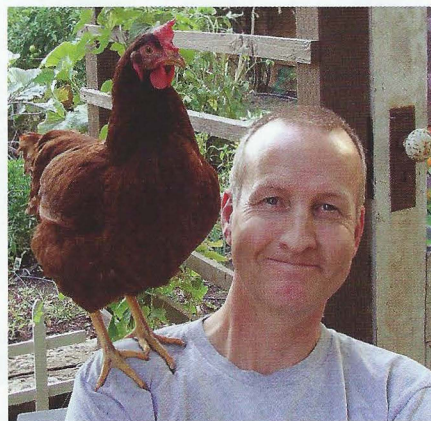
MAKING CONNECTIONS

No such network existed when Sherman was hired for the job in 2012. The individual garden coordinators “didn’t know their neighbors existed,” says Sherman. So he got to work, calling every school in the state. The resulting database of about 350 school gardens has since grown to more than 500. “Now they can go on our website and find help next door,” says Sherman. “They’re visiting each other’s gardens and sharing each other’s problems and solutions.”

Sherman, an American Horticultural Society (AHS) member, also helped organize Oregon’s first annual school garden summit, which took place this past January near Salem. More than 200 people attended, and plans are underway for a second summit in January 2015. He also attended this year’s AHS National Children & Youth Garden Symposium in Columbus, Ohio, as a presenter.

In addition to his work with school gardens, Sherman supports school cafeterias, local farmers, and nonprofits engaged in farm-to-school activities. He is responsible in part for managing a \$1.2 million grant from the Oregon Department of Education to incorporate local produce into school lunches. This side of his job allows him to facilitate what he sees as one of the most important aspects of school gardens—allowing the students to eat the fruits or vegetables of their labor.

“We find that when kids go through the seed-to-table process, when they’re actually participating and having educational opportunities take place in the garden, and



Left: Rick Sherman and a feathered friend in his home garden. Above: Harvesting cranberries from the cranberry bog school garden near Pacific High School in Port Orford, Oregon.

when produce they’ve grown is brought into the cafeteria, they will eat it,” he says.

COMMON GROUND

From Sherman’s experience, the success of school gardens is most hampered by the absence of a long-term plan, lack of support from the school administration, and the low retention of volunteer coordinators, who are often parents who leave the school after their children graduate. To avoid these stumbling blocks, “start small and do something you can do well. Have a sustainable plan,” he advises.

A big challenge for school gardens is finding funding when school budgets are already so thin. But even that can be worked out with a little tenacity, says Sherman. One of Oregon’s most ambitious school garden

coordinators, Kelly Douglas, earlier this year raised \$30,000 for a school garden in her small community. “She just knocked on doors and called people,” says Sherman. “She doesn’t take no for an answer.”

BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Despite all the challenges, or perhaps because of them, Oregon boasts a diverse mix of school gardens that often reflect the innovative approaches the individual garden’s coordinators have taken.

In Portland, where space on school grounds is limited, for example, “they have the garden on their roof, or they’ll have a vertical garden on a fence in burlap sacks,” says Sherman. “We have the country’s only cranberry bog school garden.”

No matter what kind of garden a school has, Sherman’s job is to offer the guidance and resources needed to help it flourish. He knows that if they are well run, these gardens can benefit the health and well-being of students for years to come. For him, “that’s what it’s all about.”

Sarah Miller is a former editorial intern with The American Gardener.