

Elementary students get hands dirty learning about where food comes from

SPRINGFIELD — A group of third-grade students from Guy Lee Elementary School got some hands-on farming experience Friday as they picked hundreds of peppers, walked through rows of lettuce, dug for worms and used their freshly harvested produce to craft their own harvest chili.

On their first field trip of the year, the 22 students took a one-mile walk from the school to FOOD for Lane County's Youth Farm, where they were by met by several volunteers and a farmer.

Video

Guy Lee Elementary school students visit the Food for Lane County Youth Farm to learn more about harvesting veggies, preparing meals, and composting with worms. (Kelly Lyon/The Register-Guard)

Gathered in a half-circle at the edge of the farm, the students listened to farmer Jean Marie Spilker talk about her love of the land and what the students would be doing for the day. Several children, eager to learn about farming, could barely keep still or quiet as they split into groups of three, visiting one station at a time, switching after 45 minutes.

To kick things off, one group headed out to the corner of one field to harvest peppers. Another group took a short walking tour through jungles of broccoli and huge tomato plants to complete a scavenger hunt, while a third group made the bean base for the harvest chili.

October is National Farm to School Month, and Lane County is celebrating by inviting 187 students to various farms in the area to learn about where their food comes from.

Megan Kemple, the farm to school program director for Willamette Farm and Food Coalition, said the event was particularly special to the students of Guy Lee because so many of the children live within a couple miles of the farm. The majority of the district's students live in poverty, Kemple said.

"Many students in the Springfield district live in poverty and don't really have access to fruits and veggies," Kemple said. "So this is a great way for kids to understand where fruits and vegetables come from. They get excited when they see a worm or a purple carrot, kale, kohlrabi, cilantro, peppers or corn. ... Most kids don't know that food grows from the ground."

While the students were interested in various aspects of the farm, one thing that continually perplexed most of the children was the bright purple color of their harvested carrots.

“Carrots aren’t purple!” they exclaimed as they pulled the long roots from the earth. “They’re orange!”

Nine-year-old Tiffany Felix said her favorite part about the entire field trip was digging for worms in the compost pile.

“They were squirming in my hand, and it felt so weird,” she said. “We were going up on the hill looking for bugs, beetles, fungi, slugs, centipedes and spiders, and we got to dig holes to find bugs.”

Mary Ellis, 24, a Food Corps member at the Willamette Farm and Food Coalition, was in charge of leading the three groups on a scavenger hunt. On a search for fruits, flowers, leafs and stems, the students had to refrain from running through the rows of produce as Ellis informed them that the parts of the broccoli the kids likely ate with dinner were actually the flower part of the plant.

“No way,” the group said in disbelief.

Ellis, who began working at the coalition in August, said she enjoyed the “hands on” work with the students.

“It’s one thing for them to see food in the store, and another to see where it grows,” Ellis said. “I think the biggest thing is for them to have an a new appreciation for fruits and vegetables, that there’s a bigger world out there besides the grocery store.”

Despite the cool fall air, the students enthusiasm for farming and all things harvest never wavered.

As part of the event, all the students got to wash and chop vegetables, add spices and stir a large pot of harvest chili. The majority of the chopping was fraught with complaints, as many of the students were convinced they wouldn’t enjoy a lot of the ingredients thrown into the soup. By lunch time, however, most of them had changed their minds about the so-called “gross veggies.”

After putting the finishing touches on their soup, the group sat cross-legged together in the grass, scarfing down their small bowls of vegetable-packed chili and spoke of how delicious their creation tasted after a day of farming.

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