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## Bethune Academy hydroponic garden a tool for reaching community



Joe Jackson, 10, a member of the Garden Gurus, checks the irrigation in the hydroponic garden Friday at Bethune Academy in Haines City. The school developed the garden through the STEM program for which it has received grants. The fifth-graders in the Garden Gurus are in charge of the garden, but the whole school is involved. PIERRE DUCHARME / NEWS CHIEF

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HAINES CITY — It's not hard to get this group of fifth-graders to eat their vegetables. In fact, they planted them themselves.

That group's members are known by their teachers and peers as the Garden Gurus. They're an in-school club that operates Bethune Academy's hydroponic garden.

This is the fifth school year that Bethune Academy has had the garden. It started with a national Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) grant that put the infrastructure in place and has grown a little bit each year. This school year, the school received a joint grant from the University of Florida and Bok Tower Gardens, in addition to a separate grant from AT&T. The school just had another grant from Lowe's approved.

"Schools are now so focused on testing," said science resource teacher Debbie Rivera. "We're very lucky to have STEM and be able to work outside of the classroom."

Carrots, cilantro, bell peppers, onions and radishes are among the crops the students are maintaining and growing. The Garden Gurus tend to the garden every day, but students from every grade come out to the garden at least once a week.

"The most important thing is that the fruits and vegetables are growing," said fifth-grader Joe Jackson, 11. "I also learned the difference between weeds and vegetables so I know not to pick out the wrong thing."

What makes the garden hydroponic is that the piping is underground and the nutrients the plants receive come from the water rather than soil from the ground, Rivera said. The plants get water three times a day through a timed water system. When the water comes on, she said, the students tend to get excited.

Each grade level has its own allotment of vegetables and gets to choose what's done with them, Rivera said. Some hold tasting parties, some get cooked in the cafeteria and some get sold to parents, with the money reinvested into the garden. Rivera added that future aspirations for the garden include delivering the crops to elderly residents who struggle to leave their homes and perhaps even selling at the city's weekly farmer's market.

"The goal is for the kids to reach the community," she said.

Paris Pritchett, 11, Michelle Jaimes, 11, and Kyndall Green, 10, all said their favorite vegetable to eat was the Romeo carrot.

"I like growing the plants and eating them afterward," said Paris. "I usually make a salad."

Kyndall said she has a garden at home and had some gardening experience before joining the club while Michelle said she wasn't sure what to expect when she started.

"I just wanted to try it out," she said. "I really like planting and helping out. You really got to take good care of the plants."

Occasionally, Rivera said, some of the students get to take the produce home and some are given seeds to plant their own garden. She said having access to vegetables is also good for the students on a nutritional basis.

"Getting to see where the food comes from is the biggest thing," Rivera said. "The kids then get to make better choices."

Joe said, when he was in first grade, he would stay after school and help the science teacher deliver the vegetables to nearby residents in need of food. That experience inspired him to become a Garden Guru this year, he said.

"I knew I could really help out," he said. "My favorite part is planting and harvesting."

Joe's career ambition for the moment is to become a professional basketball player, but he said he could see himself working in a garden either as a hobby or a career. He added that coming back to Bethune Academy to help tend the garden after his school days are over isn't out of the realm of possibility.

Typically, the students start to plant seeds in August, but because of a couple of setbacks, seeds weren't planted until last month. Rivera said crops should be ready to harvest in the spring and added that the garden has been a school-wide effort.

“We’ve planted about 850 seeds,” she said. “In the school, we have 460 kids. I’d say over 400 planted a seed in December.”

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Yverson St-Cyr, part of the 5th grade Garden Club, cleans the container in the hydroponic garden at Bethune Academy in Haines City, Florida January 8, 2016. Bethune Academy has a hydroponic garden through the STEM program that it's received grants for. The "Garden Gurus" are in charge of it.



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The 5th grade Garden Club work in the hydroponic garden at Bethune Academy in Haines City, Florida January 8, 2016. Bethune Academy has a hydroponic garden through the STEM program that it's received grants for. The "Garden Gurus" are in charge of it.



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Bailey Dykes, part of the 5th grade Garden Club, writes name of plant on plastic fork to identify plants they are growing in the hydroponic garden at Bethune Academy in Haines City, Florida January 8, 2016. Bethune Academy has a hydroponic garden through the STEM program that it's received grants for. The "Garden Gurus" are in charge of it



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Soulley Geigel, part of the 5th grade Garden Club, sweeps up dirt and debris in the hydroponic garden at Bethune Academy in Haines City, Florida January 8, 2016. Bethune Academy has a hydroponic garden through the STEM program that it's received grants for. The "Garden Gurus" are in charge of it.



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(L-R) Yverson St-Cyr, part of the 5th grade Garden Club, with help from Debbie Rivera, Science Resource Teacher, plants Basil in the hydroponic garden at Bethune Academy in Haines City, Florida January 8, 2016. Bethune Academy has a hydroponic garden through the STEM program that it's received grants for. The "Garden Gurus" are in charge of it.