

CORNELL GARDEN RESEARCH

Delaware County
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By Cheryl Petersen

The third grade class at Downsville Central School listened to Jeanne Darling, Executive Director at Cornell Cooperative Extension in Delaware County, say, "Today, we are going to take pictures of your food tray, before and again after, lunch." The students appeared more impressed with the fact they were getting their picture taken twice, rather than the reason: the before and after pictures are part of data being collected over a two-and-half year period for a study on the correlation between gardening and eating healthier.

Jeanne, along with students from Cornell College, have been teamed up to participate in a research funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service. The pilot research began with Nancy Wells, from the Department of design and Environmental Analysis at Cornell University. "It's an effort to study how children respond to gardening," said Jeanne. "The goal is to increase fruit and vegetable consumption with youth." The pilot program, dubbed, "Healthy Gardens, Healthy Youth" is under the guidance of Nancy Wells from the Department of Design and Environmental Analysis at Cornell University.

The concept can be traced back to 2009, when Agriculture Secretary, Tom Vilsack declared the first "People's Garden," at a site in Washington D.C. at the USDA Headquarters. The People's Garden honors Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday, and is meant to benefit the community, be a collaborative effort, and offer the

opportunity to practice sustainability.

With an interest in the People's Garden, Nancy Wells, implemented the "Healthy Gardens, Healthy Youth" pilot project as a Cornell Extension partnership that aims to engage more than 4000 elementary students in creating vegetable and fruit gardens in 54 low-income schools. The research study is in its second year and key partners include: Washington State University Extension, Cornell University Cooperative Extension, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, and University of Arkansas Extension.

Researchers are examining the effects of school gardens on the student's fruit and vegetables consumption, and other educational outcomes. Outside Downsville School, there are four raised garden beds. Last year, students from grades 2, 4, and 5 planted seeds and grew and harvested fruits and vegetables. "The students themselves collected data and learned the value of eating fresh foods," said Darling. "They even took care of the garden during the summer months."

While the children were learning about gardening, attention was also brought to eating healthy and exercising. "Some of the children wore accelerometers," explained Darling. "They track how many steps the student takes plus movement." An accelerometer is an electromechanical device that will measure acceleration forces. These forces may be static, like the constant force of gravity pulling at your feet, or they could be dynamic - caused by moving or vibrating the accelerometer. Basically, they measure energy spent in movement.

Photography comes into play at

lunchtime. The before and after lunch pictures reveal what foods were eaten, or not. Each child's plate is documented and analyzed. This year, those same students, now in grades 3, 5, and 6, again planted a garden and repeated the routine. Data collected will hopefully reveal progress made in healthier lifestyles.

Cornell University students, Alex Gensemer, Ivy Mumo, and Alvin Nugroho spent many days at Downsville collecting data and observing. "It's very interesting," said Ivy, a junior at Cornell. "I am majoring in Nutrition Science, however can see how education and nutrition and the many different ways the children learn, all interplay in the study." Since Ivy has been involved, her own interest in gardening as perked up. "My mom use to garden but I never did when I was a kid, but now I started a garden and am growing basil."

Alex and Alvin agreed that the "engagement of the children" is really important. "I've enjoyed seeing how the children respond to what they are taught," said Alex, senior. Alvin pointed out, "We also get to see the values we learned in college classes, in action here at the elementary school."

Downsville teachers, Mrs. Reed, and Joan Tubridy, were assisting the class outside on May 20 as the children planted a variety of garden plants in the ready soil. "You want to be careful, even with the soil, when you are planting," said Tubridy to the children. "You want the soil to stay light and fluffy. We don't want to pack down the dirt. Light and fluffy soil allows the seeds to emerge." A few minutes later, Tubridy also told

Ayres said she would very much like to know the names of the other

the sidewalks, if one looked closely enough.

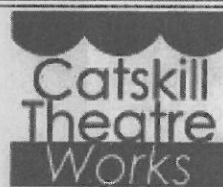


Cheryl Petersen/DCT
Zachery Joyce, Matthew Maley, Klay Hammond, Ana Gravley, and Alvin Nugroho (Cornell Student) plant seeds at DCS

a student who had squeamishly discovered a worm, "worms are good for the soil."

The seeds are planted, the plants are growing. The Cornell students will be analyzing data this summer. "The data is coming from

four corners of the United States," said Darling. The nationwide network hopes to contribute toward a sustainable environment and food system while increasing fruit and vegetable consumption with youth.



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