

“What a great group of 5th graders we have this year!” That has been the garden volunteers unanimous feelings so far this year after our first three classes. This past week it was the turn of Mrs. Fortner’s students to experience their first trip to the gardens to get their hands dirty and to begin their year-long experiments by ‘hands on doing’ in the outdoor classrooms.

In the classroom, Mrs. Keifer spoke about planting seeds from packets and transplants. This was a bit of a review from several weeks ago when the students were given a quick in classroom course on garden essentials. Always in the classroom programs the students are reminded that “Safety is No Accident”. In spite of using adult tools and working hard, students have never had a serious accident in the gardens. We continue to emphasize **Safety First** in all that we and the students do!

The compost team recorded temperatures, both air and compost, read the rain gauges, collected rain water, and cut up various plant material for the compost bins. We still have some wonderful compost in bin #3 thanks to the hard work of last year’s 5th graders and the current compost team worked hard in moving that to areas where more soil/compost is needed. Large on the list of things to do this week is to empty that bin so that the contents of bin #2 can be moved to bin #3. During the school year the 5th graders will make over a ton of compost. A math problem they may be asked to solve is: “How much is this compost worth assuming a good grade of compost like this sells for \$10 for a 40 pound bag?”

While we are talking compost, the in class lesson this week and next will be all about compost and how important decomposition is. This lesson is on pages 9 and 10 of the student gardening manual and the discussion will be led by Mr. Opperman, who is certified by the State of Texas as a Master Composter. Did you know that each year over 2000 bags of leaves, pine needles and grass are used for mulch and compost on the Oak Forest campus? While it is easy to buy fertilizer and mulch for plants, it is even better to use all the nutrients that are found in decomposing organic matter to use in the gardens. As OFE gardens are all organic, we rely on these free resources for our gardening efforts. Don’t send yours to the landfill on trash day, do bring them to the school and drop them off by the sign on the east parking lot back by the water tower.

As the week before, other teams planted various cole crops from purchased transplants. This included cauliflower, collards, and broccoli. Seeds were also planted. This is a perfect week to plant seeds in the garden. Summer has hung on for a bit longer than most years. Hot and dry are not good conditions to get seeds germinating, but this week with warm soil and a front expected Wednesday, conditions are ideal. The short and consistent rain showers are also a plus. Every plant has its season. Students were reminded to check the planting chart in their booklet or on the web site for the ideal planting times.

Students, too, are beginning to get ready to harvest sweet potatoes. Last year over 700 pounds were harvested in the school gardens. This is always a fun time for the students as they all hope to find the biggest potato. While that may be their goal, actually the smaller potatoes are usually better tasting. With about 140 students there should be plenty for all. When the potatoes come home, put them in a dark cool place, not the refrigerator, until you want to use them. If stored properly they will be fine until Thanksgiving. Two teams last week began cutting back the vines which were mulched and put into the compost bins. These potato slips were planted in May by students from last year. Wow! Have they grown well this past summer!

The OFE Growers is a group of parents, grandparents, and community members who volunteer to maintain the gardens and nature programs at the school. We are a 501-c-3 all volunteer non-profit organization. Emily Fortner, a 5th grade science and math teacher, is the president of the Growers organization. We would love to have additional volunteers and support from you. Give Mrs. Fortner a call at 281-641-2834 or e-mail her at: emily.fortner@humbleisd.net, if you have questions or can help in any way.

We rely heavily on your donations to the www.ofegrowers.org to fund the gardening program. We still have a small amount of preserves from the summer garden we would love to give you in return for a donation. You can e-mail hoppergo@aol.com for a current list of availability. The gardening program could not survive without this financial help! If you do not want to keep the jars from purchased preserves, do bring them back to school. We can reuse them again next year and save about 75 cents per jar recycled.

The gardening program is off to a great start this school year. Thanks for all your help in giving these students an experience they do not get in any other Humble ISD schools. This is another reason why OFE is someplace special.