

It felt a little bit like fall this week, which made gardening outdoors a pleasure! We are looking forward to the cooler temperatures to come. Adding to the fall-like feel was the fact that the sweet potato harvest was begun. Each student in Mrs. Smart's classes took home several sweet potatoes along with radishes, long beans, okra, cucumbers, and eggplants. A few remaining peppers also found their way into some students' bags. Remember that sweet potatoes should be cleaned, dried off and left at room temperature for at least a week to two weeks before being used. This time allows the carbohydrates in the potatoes to break down into sugars. One of the varieties we grow are actually red-skinned with white flesh. These are a Japanese type of sweet potato. Treat them like our orange types, and the taste, if not the look, will be the same as the others. The sweet potato harvest will continue for a few more weeks. About 80 pounds were harvested last week and we anticipate that there will be at least another 500 to 700 pounds by the end of October.

From time to time we will be sending home easy recipes for you to try at home using the harvest that the students bring home. This week we sent home a recipe to make a tasty dish of bacon green beans. It simply calls for steaming the cut beans lightly, and then tossing them with crispy bacon crumbles and cooked onions, salt and pepper to taste. Mmmm, what's not to love about that combination! We will also post some of these recipes on our website.

We have seen an unprecedented influx of caterpillars, most likely 'armyworms', devour our cucumber, squash, and radish leaves. They have also eaten many leaves on our cole crops. The invasion has made us tear out the cucumbers and squash plants ending that harvest until the spring planting season in order to stop their reproductive cycle somewhat. Speaking of loosing crops, much of our citrus, including lemons, satsuma oranges, and grapefruit, both by the main garden and in the orchard have been stolen! To add insult to injury, these fruits were not even ripe! This is a big loss for the fifth grade gardeners. Last year we had a great harvest of well over 500 pounds! Unfortunately this year, which at first looked like it would be another great year, will now be a slim citrus year. It is hard to understand why someone feels they can do this!

In the gardens we have little lettuce plants, spinach, radishes, broccoli, collards, carrots, cabbage, Kale, and Sugar Snap peas. Other than the radishes most of it is at least a few weeks from harvest. The hot weather up to this point has been hard on cool season plants but we hope that cooler weather will speed their growth.

This week composting continued as the lesson in class. The discussion is 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. **Please don't send your leaves and pine needles 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.** We rely heavily on these for our gardens and trees. Please no brush or trash!

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 a special place! Do go to the student's gardening web site to see all that they are doing! www.ofegrowers.org.