

Last week was another rainy week for gardening. Mrs. Smart's students nonetheless were able to go out on Thursday for their half hour in the gardens. It was a busy time as another 35 feet of sweet potatoes were dug. The harvest has been good this year and almost two hundred pounds were retrieved along the fence in the orchard garden. The remaining 35 feet in the orchard are slated for harvest this week. Students will be studying soil and specifically healthy soil in class. Without healthy soil we cannot grow healthy food. Without healthy food those who eat it won't be healthy either. We are already on pages 11 & 12 of the gardening manual. While the manual stays at school, the upcoming lessons are always found on the students' web site: www.ofegrowers.org, then click on 5th grade program & garden lesson. Students are reminded that at the end of the year they are tested on the questions in their manual. Since it is an open book test, it is super easy to get an A, if they fill in the blanks as they review the lessons. Parents are encouraged to read the lessons on line and quiz their children on the answers to the questions.

The harvests are becoming less, other than sweet potatoes, until the cool season plants are ready to pick. We are still getting a bit of okra, long beans, a few tomatoes and peppers. Spicy peppers are sent home in specifically marked sandwich bags as being hot. It seems that there was a bit of a contest going on in Mrs. Smart's classroom after school last week, as to who could eat these spicy Mariachi peppers raw. Hmm, we think that we saw a few students go to the water fountains!

As students bring home more sweet potatoes, please let them cure for a few weeks at room temperature before they are used. During the curing process, the starches in the sweet potatoes turn to sugar giving the potatoes their satisfyingly sweet taste. A simple way to fix the sweet potatoes is to scrub them thoroughly, then dry them. Pierce their skin, then rub them with olive oil and bake in the oven until soft. Serve as you would any baked potato by cutting them open and putting a pat of butter into the hot potato, then top with honey, maple syrup or a bit of brown sugar. If you eat the skin, you will even get more nutrients from your potato.

More radishes, more spinach and some mizuna were planted last Thursday. Mizuna is an Asian green from Japan that is mildly spicy and crisp. It is great used in a green salad or used in a stir fry, added at the end of the cooking period. It contains a lot of vitamin A, C, K and beta carotene. Growing less known vegetables and fruits will broaden the students' palates to new and yummy tastes. Speaking of lesser known fruits, we will start picking our bountiful crop of Meiwa kumquats shortly, perhaps even this week. Meiwa kumquats are high in vitamin C, A, E and B-complex. They also contain antioxidant-rich flavonoids, which are more concentrated in the skin. The skin also contains high amounts of fiber and pectin, as well as volatile oils that offer both health benefits and essential oils. Kumquats are eaten whole. They can be eaten fresh, cooked, or preserved. They can also be used as an ingredient in desserts, beverages, and salsas. They pair well with white meats, seafood, red meats, chiles, herbs and creamy cheeses. Store Meiwa kumquats at room temperature for up to a week or refrigerate for up to three additional weeks.

As OFE gardens are all organic, we rely on many 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 by the water tower.** We rely heavily on these for our gardens and trees. Please no brush or trash! We received over 2000 trash bags full last school year.

The OFE Growers is a group of parents, grandparents, and community members who volunteer to maintain the gardens and nature areas 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 do not receive funding from the school district. The gardening program will not survive without your financial help! Our budget this year is \$9350. That is a chunk, but every little bit helps. If you do not want to keep the jars from purchased preserves, do bring them back to school. We can re-use them again next year and save about 75 cents per jar recycled. There is a box in the entry way for these jars. We also need **clean plastic grocery bags**. We use about 100 per week packing up produce for students to take home. We would also love to have your pumpkins after Halloween or Thanksgiving. In our compost heap they make great compost. Students dig out the seeds and plant them in the Spring. Everyone can take home a pumpkin plant if they wish. Finally if you are looking for an organization to make a tax deductible contribution at the end of this year, please consider the OFE Growers. Contributions can be sent to: OFE Growers, PO Box 1525, Humble, TX 77325. Thank you for your support!