

The startup of our new year with the 5<sup>th</sup> grade was met with eagerness and enthusiasm by the students. We were able to get together with all the 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes using a small team approach. Each team moved from station to station to learn about the garden. There were stations that focused on tool safety such as working with pruning shears, shovels, trowels, and rakes. The students also visited work and task centers (such as the compost area to discuss the value of composting - basic to organic gardening, and on to measurements where produce is weighed, rain fall is recorded, and the health of the compost bins is monitored by measuring the individual bins' temperatures). Finally each team toured the three major garden areas (main, annex, and orchard/garden) learning about raised beds, bed preparation, planting techniques, harvesting, and safety in the gardens. The focus of this exercise was to get acquainted with each other, the gardens, and gardening.

This next week begins our regular program with a classroom lesson and then a ½ hour class visit to the gardens in both the morning (11:20.) and again in the afternoon (2pm) to work in the gardens (one class in the morning and another in the afternoon.) There are four 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, so that means it will take two weeks to cover a garden lesson. The first lesson is about composting.

Volunteers will meet in the morning at 8:45 to prepare for the morning class getting together the tools that each team will need as well as any garden supplies. Classrooms divided into teams will be escorted to the gardens by their teachers where they will join their individual team volunteer to work on separate garden projects for ½ hour after which they will return to their in-school class schedules. The volunteers will have a break after the first class for lunch and to allow time to prepare for the afternoon class at 2pm. After the afternoon class has concluded its work the volunteers will collect and clean the tools before putting them away. The next week will be a repeat of the composting lesson with the remaining two 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes, one class in the morning and the other in the afternoon as before.

In the Oak Forest gardens we strive to practice entirely organic gardening. That means we use no chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides or other non-organic gardening methods. You would think from TV and other advertising that this would not be possible, but it is and our gardens are proof of it. During the past 12 months we have grown over 4000 pounds of organic fruits and vegetables. Most of these went home with last year's 5th graders. Some that was harvested after school closed in March was enjoyed by the volunteers. Most of the summer harvest was preserved and is available for a donation to help fund this gardening program and the supplies and infrastructure needed to continue the program.

How can you help? As part of the program the students make tons of compost each year. We have several composting areas around the campus, the major one is next to the red shed on the south side of the school. Compost is the heart and soul of any organic garden. It is the best fertilizer that you can use! It is also free, other than the work put in to make it properly. In addition to composting we also use hundreds of bags of pine needles and leaves to mulch around the trees and on the planting beds. We would love to have any leaves or pine needles you do not use in your gardens. We also can use freshly mowed grass. We love the leaves to be mulched if you have a mulching mower. Bags of these things can be dropped by the water tower behind the east parking lot. Please don't make them so heavy a 5th grader can't handle them. Also please no trash or brush in the bags. Finally, since we strive to be all organic, we ask that you not bring any grass that has been sprayed or treated with any kind of chemical. These all are great resources that find a better home at Oak Forest Elementary School than in the Atascocita landfill.

As always stay safe,