

As of this writing, we have had a number of outdoor meetings with OFE's 5th grade students. We are enjoying each other as we build on the different facets of our gardening experience together. In the first lesson set, we came to understand that compost is not soil but in fact it is recycled decomposed organic matter from once growing plants and is considered plant food. The significance of this is that the former plants had gathered and synthesized the nutrients that now make up the decomposed compost. In essence this material can be thought of as concentrated packets of essential plant nutrients and is a remarkable example of nature's recycling process. These packets can be found everywhere on the forest floor, as mulched grass clippings, and in flower beds. At OFE the making of compost is a vital part of our gardening program. If you have visited the gardens you will have seen that compost is in no little part a reason for the success of the school gardens. Have you ever seen Okra that has grown so vigorously (over 9 feet tall), or yard long beans that are trying to compete with the okra. OFE 5th grade students make better than a ton (2000 pounds) of this wonderful plant food each year. Unlike commercial fertilizers, compost cannot easily be over used.

Our current lesson set has been on planting seeds and transplants. The planting of seed is a direct process and results in the beds to which these seed have been planted to await germination (which in the case of carrots can take 12 – 20 days), followed by a growth period, and then a maturation period before the crop is harvested. This will tie a garden bed up for a specified period of time.

Another process which can help to maximize garden productivity is the planting of transplants. First let me say that transplanting is not an option for all crops. There can be many benefits when it is an option though. The most obvious is the more efficient use of garden space. Plants can be started in pots at a time of ones choosing and moved to the garden according to a plan thus optimizing garden usage. Another benefit is it allows us to plant crops that might otherwise take too long to mature if planted directly into the garden (e.g. fall tomatoes.) Once moved to the garden beds these transplant might already be several weeks to a month old. This approach does require careful planning as plants can become spindly or stressed and no longer ready to be put into the garden. Our students have already transplanted a number of different vegetables into the gardens. These include broccoli, kale, cauliflower, cabbage, and squash. While it might be too hot to plant these vegetables in August they can be planted in a controlled environment and then put outside once the weather is favorable thus getting a jump start on the planting and harvesting of a crop.

Along these lines we are adding a mini-greenhouse to our gardens so that we can add this approach to our learning experience. Normally we would just buy transplants from a nursery but we are not guaranteed that they will have the plants we want when we want them. There are a number of additional reasons that this is a useful approach. It is a skill worth cultivating and so we have added this feature to our gardening program.

This coming week we will be concluding our seed and transplant lesson set. The next lesson after the break will be on cole crops (10/15).