

Oak Forest sprouts green thumbs with growers program

Written by David Tatchin
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Students of Oak Forest's 2021 fifth grade class receive instruction as they learn in the garden.

Oak Forest Elementary's growers program has been teaching their students the essentials of gardening for nearly two decades.

Student Activities Coordinator Gudrun Opperman said the program originated in 2004, and was the brainchild of Deborah Krenek. Starting essentially from scratch, she, alongside several volunteers, developed the program into what it is today.

"Currently, we have 16 volunteers who all work part time to ensure the success of the program," said Opperman.

"Students who are in fifth grade learn the basics of gardening. They complete meaningful tasks in teams (under supervision) from the initial planting and maintain plants through the weeding and harvesting stages. As a part of their math and science classes, the students receive a grade for their efforts. The program aligns with the TEKS requirements, as established by the state of Texas," explained Opperman.

Due to the limited number of volunteers, half of the program's students perform gardening activities in one week, and in the following week, they alternate with the remaining half. There are five to six classes of approximately 30 students each.

Opperman explained that after the students graduate elementary school and head for summer vacation, the team of volunteers continues to upkeep the plants and ready them for harvest.

"Produce that is generated during the school year goes directly to the students, which is rewarding since they are able to enjoy the product of their efforts. Any produce that is harvested during the summer months is canned, preserved and sold to help fund the program," said Opperman.

The program produces a vast amount of produce, considering the fact that this is an elementary school program. In 2020, over 3,000 pounds of produce were harvested. A wide variety of produce such as tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, squash, bananas, thyme, rosemary, etc. can all be found in the school's garden.

"My favorite part of serving in this role is opening the eyes of students to what can be grown. We teach students the importance of growing and consuming food that is grown organically and with no chemicals. Additionally, we teach

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students the importance of healthy eating habits, and it is always an encouragement to hear younger students excited to start the program when they enter fifth grade," said Opperman.

Oak Forest Elementary hosts two events on an annual basis to raise funds for the program, and relies on the sales of canned produce, including jams and jellies, for funds. If interested in donating or for more information about the program, visit OFEgrowers.org.