

Learning to grow and growing to learn



📷 Colton Sibley, a fourth grader at Sam Case Elementary School in Newport, gets some help from Bill Shapiro, a master gardener apprentice, while planting seeds at the school on Thursday, April 11. (Photo by Steve Card)

By: STEVE CARD - Updated: 3 days ago

Posted Apr 16, 2019

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Master gardeners help students plant seeds

Students in Penny McDermott's fourth grade classroom at Sam Case Elementary School in Newport are learning about growing plants, with the assistance of members of the Lincoln County Master Gardeners Association. But at the same time that they are learning to grow, the young people are also growing in their learning and understanding of concepts like math and scientific observations.

The covered play area at the school was a flurry of activity on Thursday, April 11, as the students and master gardeners worked together to plant seeds in more than 800 pots that will first be nurtured in Sam Case's greenhouse before being planted at the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse Garden in late May. The master gardeners have named this event the "Seed Palooza."

But last week's activity wasn't just about putting seeds in pots, and that's where the event became a blend of the classroom and real life applications.

"We had four different stations going on, and I was working with the kids on division," said McDermott. "Understanding and interpreting a remainder is a fourth grade standard, so we were tying it in with seeds and thinking about trays and the amount of seeds we would need for each tray — to make the math standards practical, and the kids could apply it with what they were doing with the garden."

McDermott said through this project, the students also learn about nutrition. Once a month, Jennifer Pettit, a nutrition education program assistant with the Lincoln County Extension Office, visits the classroom. "She does a healthy recipe with the kids," McDermott said, "and we're constantly talking about nutrition and fruits and vegetables and gardening and just getting fresh air and exercise and being outside, so we're tying all of those together."

Following last week's Seed Palooza, the learning will continue as the plants start growing in the greenhouse. Michael Christy, a master gardener who is the primary coordinator and mentor for the garden project, said, "Every week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, Penny will give us about seven of the kids, and they'll come out here with our master gardeners. They'll water all the plants that are in there, (and) they'll do measurements, check temperature, humidity, kind of supporting the STEM program, things they're already doing in math."

The students enthusiastically planted all the seeds last Thursday, which included "everything you can eat, and heavy also on the pollinators, sunflowers, a lot of flowers for the pollinators," Christy said. "We're creating a whole pollinator bed up

≡ there this year, which we haven't had before. We're putting asparagus up there, which we have not done before." All of the produce harvested from the garden is donated to Food Share of Lincoln County.

And Christy said the students often get personally involved in this project. "A lot of them put their names on some of the plants because they want to follow up," he said. "And as we talk to them individually, we ask them, 'What plant did you plant?' and they start talking about it."

These same students who planted seeds last week were the ones who harvested the Lighthouse Garden last fall, which had been planted by last year's fourth grade class. So the cycle is somewhat reversed for these young people — first harvesting and then planting. But in a way, seeing the end result as they begin the school year helps them to envision what the seeds they planted last week will become.

"I like doing the harvesting first because they know ultimately where this project is going in the end," McDermott said. And the reaction from the students? "They absolutely love it," she said, adding that a group was visiting the greenhouse at the start of this week, "and we have some sprouts already coming up, so they're just really excited to be part of the process."

Doug Hoffman, a former teacher with the Lincoln County School District, is also a master gardener and works with Christy on this project. When asked what he enjoys most about his involvement, Hoffman said, "Just the enthusiasm of the fourth graders, (and) Mrs. McDermott is just a firebrand teacher that's fun to work with."

Hoffman said it's also a way for these young people to learn from the older generations about the love of gardening. "I learned it from my grandmother, (and) a lot of these kids talk about learning gardening from the parents or their grandparents. So we just want to model that gardening is important, that we can grow our own food, that sustainability is important and that it's just a lot of fun to grow a garden, whether it's flowers, herbs or vegetables."

McDermott has also found this project to be a way to get the parents of her students involved at the school. They start out helping in the greenhouse and garden, "and that's how I can hook a lot parents, and then ultimately they come into the classroom, and they're helping out with academics, too. But it's a great way to bring the family to school."





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