

Kids find joy in gardening at the governor's mansion

PLANTWISE | Jennifer Fishburn

Fried okra, collard greens and fresh salsa have become favorite food dishes of junior gardeners from the 21st Century Program, Graham Elementary School. This summer these students nurtured a 484-square-foot vegetable garden at the Illinois Executive Mansion.

The garden was started on April 22 by six youth and nine Master Gardener volunteers. The students were very excited to plant tiny seeds and watch them become plants. As horticulture educator for University of Illinois Extension Sangamon-Menard Unit, I mentored the students along with Master Gardener volunteers. Master Gardener volunteers involved with this project include Jim Nachtwey, Darrell and Vicky McMurray, Lin Vautrain, Jane Passerini, Denise Brown, John Janssen, Barbara Rogers and Bill Hunt. One of the young gardeners, Kiley Porter, commented that the best part of coming each week is, "Being here with you (the volunteers) and planting food."

The 44-foot by 11-foot garden, located on the east side of the mansion driveway, contains a variety of vegetables including lettuce, radishes, cabbage, carrots, tomatoes, peppers, green beans, onions, collards, Swiss chard, cucumbers, okra, potatoes, squash and herbs.

Along the way students experienced great joys and some challenges. Rabbits devastated the lettuce, cabbage and green bean plants. Another disappointment was a failed potato crop. The greatest joy is picking and eating the vegetables. Who knew that digging carrots could be so much fun? It was a mystery: "What are they going to look like?"

Harvesting is great fun, but eating the vegetables is even more fun. Jaylee Clark summed

it up: "My favorite part was planting and eating the carrots." Amy Rebbe, U of I Extension foods and nutrition program assistant, has met with the students several times to teach them how to cut and prepare fresh vegetables for making salsa and other food dishes. In addition, Amy prepared fried okra and collard greens. When it came to eating, Amy had one rule. "You have to try at least one bite of everything." While there was some hesitation, you could soon see the bottom of all the bowls. Darrell and Vicky McMurray marvel at how the students have found that they like the taste of many of the vegetables that they harvested.

The garden is a great way for the students to see firsthand how plants grow, and to experience tasting fresh, nutritious vegetables. The students take great pride in what they have been able to grow and volunteers have marveled at the excitement of the students. "I was amazed how the children learned so quickly and wanted to take seeds home to grow their own gardens and teach their parents! I found that the kids were very respectful of nature and comfortable and calm when planting and harvesting. I learned gardening can be stress-relieving for all ages," said Lin Vautrain.

Sheila Wilson-Madden, 21st Century Program site director, adds, "The students look forward to their weekly gathering place with excitement and anticipation. I personally derive great joy and satisfaction from knowing the positive impact this opportunity has had on the lives of the student participants and their families."

Junior gardeners who were selected based on their interest in the project included Jaylee

Clark, Nariah Clay, Arlando Crawford, Logan Fernandes, Kolby Fernandes, Kiley Porter and Collin Porter, all of Springfield.

The project was able to continue throughout the summer due to the dedication of the 21st Century Program staff Sheila Wilson-Madden, Heather Alexander and Catherine Williams. In addition, Springfield Boys and Girls Club supplied transportation. The 21st Century Program is a site-based after school academic enrichment and youth development program. It is a joint effort between the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Illinois and School District 186.

Seeds, plants and materials for the garden were donated by: Illinois Department of Agriculture, Jacksonville FFA, Lake St. Landscape Supply, Fiskars Company, Burpee Home Gardens, Christy Webber Landscapes, Illinois Correctional Industries at Menard and University of Illinois Extension Sangamon-Menard Unit.

Harry Lewis, horticulturalist at the Executive Mansion, was instrumental in conceiving the idea and preparing the garden. He says the best part of this project is "seeing the kids walk up the driveway with big smiles looking for their Master Gardener buddy so they can start working together for the day. They delve into a weeding, harvesting or a mulching project with the enthusiasm and energy of youth, making me realize that the love of gardening and growing transcends all ages."

Visitors are welcome to view the garden, located at 410 East Jackson Street, Springfield. Illinois Executive Mansion tours are available Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. □

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Jaylee Clark, Arlando Crawford and Kolby Fernandes show off their bounty. Right: Arlando Crawford digging carrots. PHOTOS BY JENNIFER FISHBURN

