



FRED BELLET

It was a field trip, for real, as students made their way across Oak Park to Highland Pines Community Center, about the distance of a football field away from their Oak Park Elementary campus. The second-graders planted new flowers in the community center's gardens. City parks and recreation staffers, teachers and neighborhood volunteers pitched in.

# Students get dirty and learn about urban farming

Robles and Oak Park elementary youngsters will see where their food comes from and how the growing cycle works thanks to Burpee and The Home Depot.

**KATHY STEELE**  
The Tampa Tribune

TAMPA — For students at Robles and Oak Park Elementary schools, gardens are producing more than a harvest of vegetables and flowers. They are teaching lessons about urban farming and communities.

More than 80 students at Robles Elementary School last week created eight vegetable beds with plants and tools supplied by Burpee Home Gardens. The school was one of five in the nation to receive a \$2,500 grant

from the company's I Can Grow Youth Garden Award.

Elijah Powell, 10, planted lake bush beans. "It's amazing," he said. "You get to plant the plant and then when they grow you get to eat them."

He will taste his beans in the classroom as part of a food service in which he already participates: the federally funded Fresh Fruits & Vegetables Program. Students eat fruits and vegetables at least three times a week as snacks in addition to breakfast and lunch.

Powell lives in an apartment where he has no outdoor space

for a garden. "That's why I signed up," he said.

He and Kadina King, 10, were among Robles fifth-graders who planted and also worked with younger students.

"We help them experience how they plant [their vegetables]," said King, who planted lettuce and cantaloupes. "I love working with little kids."

Classmates Kathleen Young and Wednesday Watkins also participated. Kathleen, 11, planted beans; Wednesday, 11, planted zucchini.

"We're going to be helping the environment," Kathleen said. "It



Soft ground from recent rain causes a sign to lean as, at right, Iyanna Pole, 7, and, second from right, Ashley Hyatt, 8, decide where to plant some of the begonias they and the rest of the Oak Park second-graders planted in flower gardens around Highland Pines Community Center.

makes more plants and more oxygen."

At Highland Pines Community Center, almost 100 second-graders from Oak Park Elementary School this month planted flowers donated by The Home Depot.

The flowers, which are blooming around the center's building and in Highland Pines Park, add beauty to the community and, in turn, help give the students a sense of what it means to be a part of that community.

"That's my goal," said Anclia Reeves, second-grader at Oak Park and second vice-president of the school's Parent/Teacher Association.

An idea brought up at a PTA meeting prompted the mass planting on a recent Friday at the community center.

A meeting with Betty Bell, president of the Highland Pines Community Task Force, settled on the community center and park as an appropriate location. Staffers from the city's parks and recreation department pitched in and Bell rounded up adult volunteers from the neighborhood to help.

The community center, on 21st Avenue, is immediately behind the school on 46th Street.

With a telephone call to a local Home Depot, Reeves quickly had 100 donated plants — at least one for each student to plant.

In their classrooms, students are learning about types of communities — at school, in neighborhoods and around the world.

"It's about how as people we help one another," Reeves said. "What can we do in our community to help one another?"

Such concepts can be a bit abstract for 7- and 8-year olds. But the hands-on flower garden is a good lesson for them, Reeves said.

School officials hope the project will become an annual event with a new location chosen each year.

Robles students were given a video camera to record and post their gardening activities on Burpee's website. Students will care for the garden beds throughout the year.

"We're encouraging them to video and blog about their experiences," said Burpee marketing director Diane Hund.

Gardens can show children how to eat better, how to take care of the environment and how home-grown food saves money. And, Hund said, "Gardening as an activity provides tons of education



FRED BELLET/STAFF

Oak Park Elementary second-graders stayed busy planting flowers at Highland Pines Community Center, assisted by city parks and recreation staffers, and neighborhood volunteers.

for kids. These are skills they will take with them forever."

Robles science resources teacher Christine Danger said some students for the first time are learning the source of the food they eat. Teachers will use some of the vegetables to make soups and salads in the classroom.

And when seeds are produced from the first crop of vegetables, they can be planted to grow more vegetables, demonstrating the full cycle of growth.

"[Teachers] want to use this food so kids see the full connection," Danger said.

Terrell Morris, 9, scooped out soil in a vegetable bed and plopped in his tomato plant. It's a fruit he "kind of" likes and looks forward to harvesting.

"It's good for plants to grow to be beautiful," he said.

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Second-graders at Oak Park Elementary wore their green thumbs and planted begonias and impatiens around the perimeter of the Highland Pines Community Center. Here, Lara Boler prepares to plant one of the flowers at the corner of E. 21st Ave. and Star Street.



Oak Park Elementary second-graders, left to right, Akasha Johnson, 7, Anna Morales, 7, and Dontarius Spigner, 8, find the perfect place for a flower to grow where the sun was shining. The Oak Park students planted flowers in the gardens around the community center at East 21st Avenue and Star Street.