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## Students learn about gardens, communities

By **KATHY STEELE**



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 this 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-grade students 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. Young, 11, planted beans; Watkins, 11, planted zucchinis. "We're going to be helping the environment," Young said. "It makes more plants and more oxygen."

At Highland Pines Community Center, almost 100 second-grade students from Oak Park Elementary School last week planted flowers donated by a local Home Depot store.

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 Ancelia Reeves, second-grade teacher 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 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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