



CUCUMBERS & COMMUNITY

BY ALLISON DRINNON | ALLISON.DRINNON@COLORADOCOUNTYCITIZEN.COM

This spring, nearly 300 students of all ages dug deep into scientific learning and vegetable beds in three community garden projects.

Five Columbus Independent School District teachers conducted the educational and developmental projects in their classrooms as part of the Columbus Education Foundation's grant program.

After months of hard work under the sun, teachers shared how the projects shaped students' connections with each other and the world.

BUTTERFLIES AND BEHAVIOR

Elementary special education teacher Lyndsey Fielding and gifted and talented teacher Tammy Ruether partnered to cultivate interactive learning through outdoor enrichment and social development by involving students from all grade levels.

"My SPED kids want to do anything that the big kids do, regardless of their level or ability," Fielding said. "Then the fifth graders, they love kind of being in charge, and it's also teaching them how to lead

and teach."

Fielding and Ruether started the Collaborative Outdoor Classroom last year with two garden beds of flowers. This spring semester, the duo expanded the project, adding more garden beds for vegetables, a picnic table with umbrella, painted steppingstones for hopscotch, a root viewer to see underground growth and numerous gardening tools.

Fielding said the garden has become a teaching tool that she can "adapt to all ages and make it relatable" for STEAM curriculum, which covers science, technology, engineering, arts and math. While teaching the butterfly life cycle, Fielding brought in caterpillars for students to watch grow, then release into the garden.

"They could kind of see (the life cycle) full circle... They were able to see it in an environment that you would naturally see those butterflies," Fielding said. "...I think it also teaches them that these things take time. Sometimes when you're just reading about it, they don't understand the amount of time and what that feels like."

The garden also works as a natural framework for kids to learn emotional and sensory regulation. Time outdoors



Elementary teacher Lyndsey Fielding and D'Mari Bolden-Anderson inspect a pot of flowers at Columbus Elementary School, April 30. Courtesy photo

Columbus High School teacher Lyndsay Schobel picks cucumbers from the community garden, June 1. Photo by the Citizen | Allison Drinnon

Continued from page 5

provides mental and physical benefits like reducing anxiety, boosting imagination, improving focus and building motor fitness. Fielding encourages students to use the space to redirect or process strong emotions with walks, take sensory breaks and socialize through play.

"Instead of getting mad and throwing things, 'Hey, if we get mad, let's take a breath. Let's take a walk. Let's do something that's more calming and more safe,'" Fielding said.

The project has also fostered community and collaboration between students in different grade levels, according to Fielding. She recalled a fourth grader who started mentoring a pre-kindergarten student after connecting with them over shared experiences in the garden.

Fielding said her goal with special education students and the outdoor classroom is to teach them social, physical and intrapersonal skills to achieve independence and success.

"These kids are all very capable of finding a job one day," Fielding said. "...Our goal is to help them in any way

possible to get to that point, whether that be controlling their emotions or being independent at a task or simply following steps."

Fielding said the outdoor classroom has been very successful behaviorally and that she intends to expand it to accommodate more students. Next year, she plans to plant seedlings earlier for better yields and to add more garden beds to have one for every grade level. She hopes to collaborate more with other classrooms.

"It's nice to see the collaboration from the entire campus, and not just Mrs. Ruether and I putting effort into things," Fielding said. "It's nice that everybody wants to see these students succeed and help them learn."

PLANTERS AND PERSEVERANCE

Eighth-grade science teacher Audrey Dyer and her students explored scientific concepts through her garden project titled "The Green Scene" but also gained a valuable lesson in perseverance and adaptability.

"We had to change plans so many times and adapt to weather and availability of the students," Dyer said. "...The students

saw that there was a possibility of, 'Hey, something can happen here. Something can grow.'"

Dyer originally intended for her community garden to be planted straight into the ground, but she switched to a hydroponic system after tilling failed. The teacher acquired several mineral tubs for cattle from a community member and repurposed them into planters.

Students sprouted seedlings in hydroponic pods, then transferred them to the buckets outdoors. The indoor-outdoor activity piqued the curiosity of others, and the number of interested students grew from 20 to 100.

"They were the pioneers of the whole system," Dyer said.

In April, heavy rain flooded the buckets, which had no drainage holes, and an unexpected freeze killed many of the plants. Dyer rallied the students to drill drainage holes and replant.

"They got excited. They really took on the role of, 'Hey, this is our garden. We need to take care of it.' They wanted to go outside," Dyer said. "...They did understand it takes a lot of planning, and they said, 'We did the best we could.'"

Dyer said the students grew some



LEFT: Michael Hubenak compares a purple flower to one painted on a slice of wood in the community garden at Columbus Elementary School, April 30. ABOVE: Leslie Verela empties a flooded container repurposed for plants in the community garden at Columbus Junior High School, May 7. Courtesy photos

produce, which they got to taste test. Some of her students tried radish for the first time and said the root vegetable “kind of tastes like dirt.” Many more invited others to taste another popular vegetable: cucumbers.

“The kids loved picking those cucumbers and cutting them and walking them around the school and saying, “Taste these cucumbers,”” Dyer said. “It was a lot of fun (and) a big learning curve.”

Dyer said growing produce allowed her students to recognize how photosynthesis and pH connect to the tomatoes grown in The Green Scene and the salsa at their dinner tables.

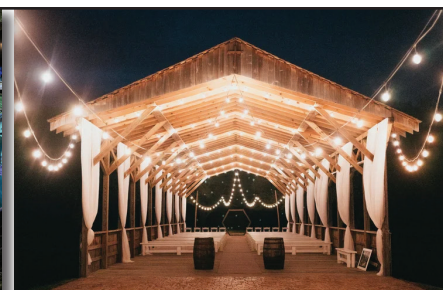
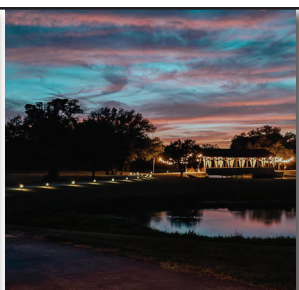
“Having anything hands on and in real life and real time makes a huge difference to teach something...from a kid’s perspective that is just boring or overwhelming,” Dyer said. “...I can tell when the kids don’t understand, and then I can tell when they do understand. You see their face light up. You see their eyes go big.”

Dyer said contributing to and witnessing the process of learning is why she loves being a teacher. In addition to cognitive development, Dyer described being invested in children’s physical well-being, leading to her decision to grow produce.

“A lot of these kids don’t eat the right food. I’m a coach, and I see what they



Ellie Beauchamp (front) and Kynlee Orsak set up hydroponic systems for growing seedlings at Columbus Junior High School, Feb. 24. Courtesy photo



Where Your Happily Ever after Begins

We are a gorgeous indoor/outdoor family owned and run venue located less than an hour west of Houston near Wallis TX. Come see where your “Happily ever after begins”. We offer hundreds of items from our “Something Borrowed” closet at no additional charge. We treat you like family because we know no other way.



5704 FM 1093 Wallis, TX 77485 | 281-804-4920 | <http://www.countryoaksvenue.com/> | CountryOaksVenue@gmail.com



Columbus garden club member Cullen Dyer picks green beans from the high school community garden, June 1. Photo by the Citizen | Allison Drinnon

Continued from page 7

eat, and I see what they drink,” Dyer said. “Especially in junior high, we try to enforce (that) healthy input will get a healthy and rewarding output...You’re not just trying to be healthy, you’re trying to be successful.”

Dyer strove to make her gardening system sustainable by reusing the hydroponic system, soil and buckets. Next year, she plans to add more hydroponic pods and grow native plants. Native plants will require less maintenance and be more weather tolerant.

“(This project) wasn’t consumable. It’s something I can do year after year, and I wanted to make sure the grant money did that,” Dyer said. “...I wanted to make sure that the hydroponic system was in place and in my classroom, so that I can continue to use it as a learning tool year after year.”

CONSTRUCTION AND A CLUB

Lyndsay Schobel, high school teacher of advanced plant and soil science, and Matt Brown, high school teacher of agricultural mechanics and metal technologies, guided two classes through revamping the school’s existing garden for community enjoyment.



“We wanted the community to see more of the garden to make it something that is a focal point or something to be really proud of that our school has,” Schobel said. “... We want it to be a place where if (students) needed a break during the day, (they can) go walk through the garden.”

In the “School Garden Paver Project,” students designed and laid decorative paths out of pavers and gravel and built a new toolshed. The new paths also combat weeds and reduce lawn maintenance. Schobel said the garden started a few years ago and has grown significantly.

“(The garden) serves two different purposes,” Schobel said. “One is the learning side for my class, and then the other side is probably more the community outreach.”

Schobel said the garden projects create real-world experiences for students while learning about blueprints, soil science, water runoff, site preparation and more. The teachers’ two classes met at different times, so the students would step in where the others left off.

“It was an absolutely collaborative effort between the two classes. Mostly student led,” Schobel said. “...We took turns doing whatever needed to be done at that time as we worked our way across the garden, so everybody kind of did everything.”

The project prompted students, both in the classes and out, to form a new garden club dedicated to sustaining the garden and giving back to the community. The club has already hosted a fundraiser to help cover the cost of the project and more. The club also donated a vegetable and herb garden to a Colorado County Habitat for Humanity family.

“The goal is to hopefully be able to do some sort of community outreach where we go and maybe do some landscaping or some gardening for elderly or disabled people who can’t get out and do it themselves,” Schobel said.

Schobel said another goal was to donate some of the produce to the school’s culinary class to cook. Students and teachers already harvest from the garden. To make this all happen, Schobel said the next step for the garden is an irrigation system.

“Part of our issue though is right now we only have one water spigot that is next to the garden, so the school is supposed to be working on getting us more water to it,” Schobel said. “It makes it easier for us to grow more.”

Sean Sutton, Trey Kohleffel and Mason Pavlicek spread gravel between pavers for the community garden at Columbus High School. Courtesy photo