



Garden is a good classroom

David Smith oversees the planting of fruit trees in a new orchard at the HCDC.

On a spring day, children from the Hiersteiner Child Development Center gingerly tasted peas from the pods they snapped fresh off the vine, grown inside the hoophouse garden a short walk west of the HCDC. Children had planted peas and were now enjoying their harvest.

“These are the students who are changing the way we relate to food,” said David A. Smith, associate professor, hospitality management.

Smith believes that school lunches and teaching children to appreciate food that comes from the garden is as important as any subject they learn in school.

“Gardening is tied to all school subjects – science, math and nutrition,” Smith said. “The garden is a good classroom.”

Smith, who the children call “Farmer Dave,” doesn’t just espouse his theories. Every Thursday afternoon, Smith is at the HCDC garden and orchard working with children, ages 2½ to 6. Thing is: Smith doesn’t consider it work. The time he spends gardening with the children, preparing harvested food for lunches and reading to them during the school year is volunteer time. The soft-spoken Smith makes sure that children are learning the food process from seed to planting to production.

“We can have an influence on the diet of these children,” he said.

The hoophouse is an unheated greenhouse with UV plastic covering to extend the growing season to four seasons. Even in winter, the temperature remains at 60 degrees. In the summer, the sides are rolled up for ventilation. Except for the week around Christmas, the plastic hoophouse is amenable for each HCDC class to have a 15-minute session with Farmer Dave. There’s also Greenhouse Dave, aka David Weger, greenhouse coordinator, who supports the plantings.

“Nothing gets sprayed in the hoophouse,” Weger said.

The hoophouse garden is a friendly place with a small flower cart sporting a welcome sign and to-do list of garden chores for the day. A basket of plastic sunglasses, small wagons and child-size garden tools are useful for tasks.

The spring brought a welcome bounty of carrots, onions, lettuce and strawberries. Smith used Swiss chard, one of the first harvests of the spring garden, in whole-wheat quesadillas. The chef has also prepared minestrone soup and pizza with fresh produce. In fact a whole pizza garden is planted – from wheat to tomatoes.

The hope is that children like what they try fresh from the garden and prefer them to choices from the fast-food window.

“The children gain exposure to foods they may not otherwise be eating. They see the seeds put in the ground, the harvesting and even the cooking. Coming out to the



(left to right) Arshiya Pant, Kyle Fleming, Emma Casebeer, Riley Dorsey and Zahra Andela taste lettuce from the garden.



Mary Thibault, supervisor, HCDC, and other volunteers from HCDC and Student Services tie willows to birch-branch frames to create living willow-hideaways.



Gabrielle Moritz waters a tomato plant.

edible schoolyard once a week gets them excited about the process. They look forward to being here," said Cassie Woiderski, HCDC child care aide.

In April, Smith planted 20 fruit trees in mouth-watering options like pear, plum, peach and apricot, and raspberry, gooseberry and blackberry bushes. Plans call for a nearby potting shed, designed by JCCC architecture students.

Smith credits Lindy Robinson, dean, business, and Sara McElhenny, program director, HCDC, for their support of the garden classroom, which Smith has been involved with since April 2008. Smith was inspired by Chez Panisse Foundation's school lunch initiative, a district-wide effort in Berkeley, Calif., to create healthier meals.

His long-term goal is for the HCDC garden to serve as a model and training area for other garden-to-lunch programs

"My dream is to have every school in the state maintain a garden classroom," Smith said. "I would like to see chefs as food directors and part of the education process so schools offer more than quick, cheap lunches."

In addition to the learning potential for children, Smith says he hopes children have fun getting in the dirt, watching plants grow and helping with the harvest. As children run into the greenhouse and greet Farmer Dave, you definitely know Smith is having fun.

The hoophouse garden was made possible from a donation from Dr. George Semb and Patricia Semb.



Children learn from nature

Children at the Hiersteiner Child Development Center will enjoy the fun, shade and privacy of living willow-hideaways thanks to 15 volunteers who planted 150 willow rods in March. Designed by landscape architects Bowman Bowman Novick, three age-specific nature-based outdoor learning centers were dedicated in October 2009. But ideal willow rod planting was slated for after the winter freezes.

Dr. Dennis Day, vice president, Student Services, led the way, poking holes 4-6 inches into the ground with a crowbar. Staff from the HCDC and Day's office planted the willow rods and tied the willows to the birch-branch frames. There are two willow-hideaways – one in the 2½-4-year-old and one in the 3½-6-year-old outdoor centers.

Robin Milliken, H&R Lawn Landscape, said the willow rods would start rooting in six weeks with regular watering and maintain their lattice shape with trimming two to three times a year.

"The willow huts will provide a private place for children to get away and think," said Sara McElhenny, director, HCDC. "Teachers can still see them and ensure safety, but the children will have a sense of privacy – an important requirement indoors and outdoors."

"Plus, children will have fun crawling in and out of the hide-aways," Milliken said.