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Chesterfield school gets growing with outdoor garden

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Students at Evergreen Elementary School in Chesterfield County this week created a garden, building raised beds from wood, filling them with soil and planting tomatoes, basil and lettuce.

At the same time, in a trailer behind the school, second-graders used kid-friendly plastic knives to slice apples and strawberries to put into a spinach salad.

The nonprofit Fit4Kids, which funded the garden and cooking programs, hopes that, before long, the garden will produce vegetables that can be used in the monthly cooking classes, said Mary Dunne Stewart, Fit4Kids executive director.

The Evergreen garden is the 2-year-old organization's first garden. It plans to open five more school gardens next year. The nonprofit, originally founded by Sports Backers, will focus on high-poverty schools.

In addition to its garden-based education program, Fit4Kids will also implement "recess coaching," which encourages all children to participate in recess, at some schools.

It also will offer "wellness integration," which will help teachers integrate lessons about physical activity and nutrition into their curriculums, at one school.

The nonprofit is also planning to launch a minigrant program that will help local schools implement programs that promote healthy eating and physical activity.

On Thursday, Sean Sheppard, who has built 16 school gardens, began creating one in an abandoned playground at Evergreen. Students came outside class by class in the light rain to help with each phase of the project, from assembling boards for the beds to sowing seeds.

Sheppard, who also runs a garden for Whole Foods Market through his business Backyard Farmer, walked them through the process.

Olivia Eggleston, 9, of Midlothian, said it was "kind of fun and interesting."

"We got to plant our own seeds and have fun planting plants together," she said after digging furrows and filling them with lettuce seeds. She said she'd gardened before with her grandmother, but not with classmates.



Sheppard plans to convert a multicolored play structure with a slide into a greenhouse. A bed was built under the metal swing set bars for beans to climb.

In a trailer behind the school, Ann Butler, founder of the business Edible Education, led the food class for second-graders.

"You've got all these good things in here!" said Pamela Armes as she directed the kids on how to put together the spinach salad.

Andrew Jones, 7, said he was having fun because "you get to learn how to cook and cut before you're grown up."

As he prepared to taste the salad, he announced, "I want to try it before I eat all of it." Then he gave it a thumbs up and dove in.

Across the room, his classmates peeled carrots, then chopped them, along with potatoes and zucchini. They put all three vegetables into a food processor with eggs, onion and flour. Butler added a touch of cheese and the kids scooped the mixture onto hot griddles to cook the vegetable fritters.

As the kids were flipping them, 7-year-old Taylor Moyer asked Butler, "Do we have to eat it?"

"You don't have to eat," Butler told her, "But I sure hope you try it."

A few minutes later, Taylor was digging in. "It's good," she decided.

Her teacher, Amanda Taylor, said later in the week she would incorporate the cooking class into her writing lessons, assigning the students to write a step-by-step description about how they made the fritters.

"This is perfect," she said. "Anything hands on, they love it."

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