

Growing IDEAS

Cultivating Gardeners of All Ages

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Food is Elementary

Schoolwork Never Tasted So Good!

When teachers at Hampstead Hill Academy in Baltimore, Maryland, retrieve their students from Ariel Demas' Food for Life class, they're met with an enthusiastic crowd eager to serve up nutrition and cultural facts they've learned, along with samples of the delicious whole-food dishes they've prepared.

Three hundred students in grades 3 through 7 learn about food, gardening, and more with Demas, who's affectionately known as The Food Lady. She uses the award-winning *Food is Elementary (FIE)* curriculum to weave all the academic disciplines through the experience of growing and working with whole foods. *FIE* encourages gardening as a way to extend food-focused learning and to bring alive the concept that good nutrition starts with healthy soil. Last year her impressive program won an NGA Youth Garden Grant, which included a \$500 Home Depot gift certificate for gardening supplies.

The Science of Food

The yearlong program begins with kids handling and tasting fresh vegetables, fruits, and grains to become familiar with them. Then they learn to associate food colors with various nutrients (yellows contain beta carotene, reds contain lycopene), and draw pictures in their Food for Life journals of how human bodies put nutrients to work. By learning to classify foods botanically as fruits and vegetables, the concept of

plants as sources of food is reinforced. (Kids get a kick out of correcting their parents if they call tomatoes vegetables!) Students also learn about safe food handling, how to make sense of nutrition labels, and — much to parents' delight — they develop cooking skills.

“Many adults underestimate children's abilities,” says Dr. Antonia Demas, author of *FIE* (and Ariel's mother). “When I give students knives and show them how to use them, I'm demonstrating my confidence in them, and they've never disappointed me.” This is another important aspect of *FIE*: it builds kids' confidence as it empowers them to make healthy choices.

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Cultural Connections

In the second semester, Ariel Demas integrates geography, history, and culture through a discussion of where foods originate. Students prepare dishes representative of various regions, such as a North African stew with whole-wheat couscous; and a Chinese stir-fry of vegetables and tofu. Students learn table etiquette, explore food as art, take field trips to farms, and prepare nutritious dinners for the community.

By the time spring arrives, the students are primed to grow some of the vegetables and fruits they have studied, prepared, and tasted in the classroom. “We've explored what the growing conditions and agricultural practices are like in the regions where these crops originated, so kids are familiar with what the plants need and how they grow before they plan the garden,” says Demas.

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FOOD IS ELEMENTARY

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Reaping a Healthy Harvest

The other, once skeptical, teachers are impressed by students' enthusiasm for healthful food. One teacher, who picked up tips about healthy snacking from the kids, thanked Demas because she's lost so much weight as a result. Students are even changing their families' shopping habits: One boy's mother now buys whole-grain instead of white bread.



The garden is also widening students' perspectives. "These are city kids — they've never had the experience of digging in the soil," says Demas, who notes that they were enthralled with bugs and worms.

Principal Matthew Hornbeck points out that, "The social aspects of the monthly community dinners are a specific benefit of Food for Life. I also include a *FIE* recipe in parent newsletters to engage the family in cooking together, which can have far-reaching benefits — far more than, say, a child spending an hour watching TV alone." He also has invited Demas to cater all staff meetings so that teachers can become more familiar with whole foods and can model healthy eating for their students. "This program increases the number of students who are willing to try new foods, and that makes a big difference." ♪

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