

Class Notes: How does your garden grow? Avalon Elementary's is winning awards

By JOE LANDON

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“The award-winning Global Garden at Avalon Elementary School is an extraordinary place. Being there gives you a magical and sometimes breathtaking feeling.”

That’s how strongly teacher Patti Thorsen feels about the garden she’s in charge of, the garden she simply loves and the garden her third through fifth graders toil in (and get their hands more than a little dirty in) after school one day each week.

A really cool part of this is the students get to work side-by-side with school neighbors, community volunteers and former Avalon students who are now in high school but love coming back to help their younger peers. And it all happens under the guidance and watchful eye of the teacher and Naples Botanical Garden (NBG) Horticulturist Marianne Ravenna. It’s that longstanding partnership between the school and NBG that keeps the garden thriving and growing along with the help of the generous residents of the nearby Windstar community who conduct an annual fundraiser to help support the garden project.

Oh, and the award-winning piece? For a second time in recent years, Avalon’s Global Garden has received a prestigious first place award in the University of Florida (UF) Environmental Horticulture Department’s School Garden Competition.

“This award is a tribute to all of the students and community members who have come together over the past 15 years to create this remarkable collaborative effort,” said Chad Washburn, director of education at NBG.

Now it is called a global garden because of the school’s population, with students hailing from many different countries around the globe and coming from a wide range of diverse backgrounds.

“The Global Garden name itself celebrates the global awareness and diversity not only within the school, but within the whole world,” Thorsen said. Fruits and vegetables from across the globe are grown there.

Working in the garden is an “enrichment opportunity” as it is described by the school. It’s a privilege in that just 24 students are chosen to get down and dirty each year based on grades, their behavior, an essay, a recommendation from their classroom teacher and their desire to learn how to garden.

But it's about much more than just finding out how to grow things. The Global Garden also serves as an outdoor lab for students engaged in science, math and literacy lessons. Plus they study our local environment while reflecting on the laws of nature. Principal Francine Eufemia calls the garden "an exceptional learning environment." And there are some character trait or "life" lessons to be learned here too according to Thorsen: "These students are demonstrating good leadership qualities and a superb sense of responsibility."

Another part of the global piece, Thorsen believes that her young gardeners have touched the world by sending some of their seeds to Third World countries to help people in need of good nutrition. "We like to think of ourselves as a small group of gardeners who can make a huge impact on the world."

One of the student gardeners hopes to personally make a difference someday. "The Global Garden has taught me that I can grow food for my family and can teach others to plant fruits and vegetables too." He proudly states that his dream or goal is to "go around the world and help people to plant their own food and stop world hunger!" He's a determined young man. I'll bet he'll be able to turn his dream into reality.



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