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Edible Education Takes Root in Orlando

BY LISA A. BEACH

EMERIL LAGASSE Foundation Kitchen House & Culinary Garden debuts in February as the new home for edible education for Central Florida students, located across from where the concept began at Orlando Junior Academy (OJA).

The 3,500-square-foot Kitchen House features a commercial kitchen classroom with four fully equipped, hands-on cooking stations with a 1,000-square-foot garden just outside the door.

"We're rooted in the Edible Schoolyard philosophy started by Alice Waters in Berkeley, California," explains Janice Banks, executive director of Edible Education Experience, the 501(c)3 public charity that now oversees the Kitchen House & Culinary Garden. "We adopted their three-pronged approach that focuses on cooking, gardening and a healthy lunch program. We put our own unique spin on it, and our non-profit slowly grew out of that."

Back in 2003, the seedling of a simple idea took root when OJA parent Brad Jones helped a first-grade teacher turn a grassy patch into a vegetable garden outside the classroom door.

"When my daughter started learning about nature, she learned the typical icons taught in school: apple trees in the summer and snowflakes and dead branches in the winter," explains Jones. "But she couldn't relate to that in Florida. I wondered how teachers could use something right outside the classroom, like an orange tree, to teach Florida students. I started thinking about how to develop a campus that uses nature as a teaching tool."



Kitchen House & Culinary Garden take shape, key components of the Edible Education Experience.

Once the project got the green light, Jones began volunteering as garden coordinator, where he helped students plant, grow and harvest fruit, vegetables, herbs and even cotton. But now that kids were learning where food comes from, they yearned to know what to do with it.

Enter Kevin Fonzo, chef-owner of K Restaurant in College Park, and Sarah Cahill, certified raw food chef and holistic nutrition coach. These two local chefs picked up where the harvest left off by volunteering to teach weekly cooking classes to OJA's fifth- to eighth-grade students. Using the garden's bounty, the chefs brought healthy cooking to life in a makeshift kitchen classroom lacking essentials such as hot water and a stove.

As the garden expanded and cooking classes were added, the "edible education"

concept grew in complexity and popularity, with amazing results.

"The best barometer of success is when you hear a parent say, 'I can't believe my child loves broccoli,'" Fonzo says. "We're teaching moderation, healthy alternatives, and how to cook from scratch. Kids are just blown away that the stuff you can buy in stores, like pasta sauce, you can make yourself."

The project has since blossomed into a full-blown, hands-on, integrated curriculum where teachers creatively cull lessons from science, math, history and language arts through gardening and cooking. But with growth came some growing pains, as the cooking class once faced elimination.

"What began as a pilot program with no funding became a board-approved program when students started a petition

SCHOOLYARD GARDENS A GROWING TREND

to save the cooking class," points out Cahill. "The entire fifth grade signed it, with the teacher turning it into a lesson on the power of petition. This student support, plus sponsorship from Whole Foods Market, catapulted edible education to the next level."

With generous funding from the Emeril Lagasse Foundation and Florida Hospital for Children, the garden-to-classroom concept evolved into Edible Education Experience, which is now housed in this one-of-a-kind facility built with the sole focus of edible education.

With its new space, Edible Education Experience can serve more of the community through field trips, after-school enrichment, summer camps, Chef Night and community gardening. Plus, the non-profit can expand its Teachers Academy where educators learn how to start gardens and cooking classes in their own schools.

What works here might be duplicated across the country, as the Emeril Lagasse Foundation looks to Edible Education Experience as a signature project.

TRINITY PREPARATORY SCHOOL, WINTER PARK

Trinity Prep's school garden, a partnership with Fleet Farming (fleetfarming.com), aims to provide students with the fun, rewarding learning experience of maintaining a garden while adding an engaging, hands-on element to the school's science curriculum. Although the edible schoolyard curriculum primarily targets sixth graders, students in all grades can help in the garden, from weeding and harvesting produce to switching out crops and joining the school gardening club for ninth to 12th graders. They've grown watermelon, green beans, basil, cherry tomatoes, mint, cucumber, chard, kale and potatoes.

"In a garden, students get out of it what they put into it. The harder and smarter they work, the better the results," says Jonathan Gray, the sixth-grade science and Florida ecology teacher who runs the program. "These students are

seeing where food comes from and are literally reaping what they are sowing."

ROOSEVELT ACADEMY, LAKE WALES

Using his skills as a professional competitive barbecuer, teacher Robert Bagby launched the Grilling Garden at Roosevelt Academy, a school for sixth- through 12th-grade students with learning disabilities. Bagby teaches students how to grow and prepare their own vegetables at home by incorporating live-fire grilling into their preparation method. The program aims to help students make smart food choices as well as teach them the gardening and cooking skills they need for a healthy lifestyle. Roosevelt maintains three organic gardens with the help of a Florida Master Gardener who volunteers five hours a week.

"Learning outside of the traditional classroom puts the students into an exciting atmosphere and teaches them lifelong skills," says Bagby.

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