

An organic on-campus farm connects kids to agriculture and growing food

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Fresno Adventist Academy fourth-graders (from left) Jacity Johnson, Elise Conception and Ty Vinkle wash radishes they picked during their class at the on-campus Harvest Fields Organic Farm in Fresno, California, October 5, 2016. John Walker/Fresno Bee/TNS)

FRESNO, Calif. — On a 40-acre school site in southeast Fresno sits a little-known farm that is inspiring minds and growing healthful food.

Launched two years ago on the Fresno Adventist Academy campus, Harvest Fields Organic Farm is a 13-acre operation producing navel oranges, vegetables and a variety of herbs. Like other organic farms, Harvest Fields uses only natural fertilizers and pesticides. It's also home to a flock of 130 pasture-fed chickens and four greenhouses.

It's still growing.

The school's little-used football field has been plowed under and is being prepared to grow potatoes. Even one of the goal posts has been repurposed as a weather station.

"We really didn't have much of a football program, so we decided to put that land to a good use," says David Obermiller. Along with his wife, Hope, Obermiller heads a small team that runs Harvest Fields Organic Farm.

Connecting Farms And Schools

The farm is a first-of-its-kind effort in Fresno and mirrors the increasing prevalence of building stronger connections between farms and schools.

On the business side, the farm sells its harvested organic fruit and vegetables through its community supported agriculture program, or CSA. The CSA has about 130 members that receive a weekly box of fresh produce from the farm.

At the same time, the Obermillers and the school's teaching staff use the farm as an outdoor classroom. The school has 211 kindergarten through 12th grade students.

At this school, students really get their hands dirty.

Bringing Radishes Home

Recently, students from Christopher Bispham's fourth-grade classroom ran excitedly across the campus to the farm's greenhouses. The students helped plant lettuce seeds in seedling containers. Once sprouted, the seedlings will be replanted and used to continue the farm's lettuce production. They also plucked radishes from the ground to be shared with their families.

"I want you to take them home and taste them and then come back and tell me what you think of them," says Timothy Hyde, greenhouse manager.

Part of what the students learn is how food is grown and, perhaps more important, what it tastes like. For some, it's the first time they've eaten a radish or nibbled on a basil leaf.

"I didn't know what basil was when I first saw it, but it tasted pretty good," says Isabella Riley. "When we come out here to the farm, we always have fun and we learn lots of stuff about food."

The Process Of Growing Food

Principal Marla Rasmussen said it's important to expose children to agriculture, one of the region's major industries. It's also important to promote the idea of eating fruits and vegetables as part of a healthy diet.

"We want our students to learn that there is a process of growing food and that it doesn't just come from the grocery store," she says.

Obermiller was lured to Fresno from an organic farm in Arizona to launch the startup farm. He said it is critical that students get to taste the food that they are helping to grow.

Reconnecting Kids To Farming

“We live in a fast-food culture where you can get food cheaply and quickly,” Obermiller says. “What we are trying to do is reconnect kids to farming and helping them understand what good food tastes like.”

The farm also welcomes students from other schools. A group of about 130 students from William Saroyan Elementary will be touring the farm soon.

Obermiller is also helping a downtown Fresno school start its own city farm project.

“I really believe kids learn better when they know the reason for what they are learning,” Obermiller says.

Quiz

- 1 All four sentences below help make the claim that the Harvest Fields Organic Farm helps kids learn about growing healthy food. Which of the following is the **STRONGEST** piece of evidence to support the claim?
- (A) Like other organic farms, Harvest Fields uses only natural fertilizers and pesticides.
 - (B) The farm is a first-of-its-kind effort in Fresno and mirrors the increasing prevalence of building stronger connections between farms and schools.
 - (C) At the same time, the Obermillers and the school's teaching staff use the farm as an outdoor classroom.
 - (D) Part of what the students learn is how food is grown and, perhaps more important, what it tastes like.
- 2 Which of the following sentences from the article **BEST** supports the idea that having the students taste the food they grow is important?
- (A) The school's little-used football field has been plowed under and is being prepared to grow potatoes.
 - (B) At the same time, the Obermillers and the school's teaching staff use the farm as an outdoor classroom.
 - (C) For some, it's the first time they've eaten a radish or nibbled on a basil leaf.
 - (D) "We live in a fast-food culture where you can get food cheaply and quickly," Obermiller says.
- 3 According to the article, why does student Isabella Riley enjoy learning at the farm?
- (A) because she has fun and gets to learn about different food
 - (B) because she gets to eat one of her favorite foods, radishes
 - (C) because she gets to meet many new friends at the farm
 - (D) because she learns about how pollution affects farms
- 4 According to the article, how are students **MAINLY** exposed to agriculture at the Harvest Fields Organic Farm?
- (A) Students learn how to plow and use a tractor.
 - (B) Students learn how to grow food from tiny seeds, and taste healthy vegetables.
 - (C) Students learn how the grocery stores buy vegetables from farms.
 - (D) Students read about farming in their classrooms.