

Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

Vol. 19 No.10

October 14 – 18, 2018

Potomac Vegetable Farms
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com

It's Tour Season

By Mariette Hiu Newcomb

Most of the children who come on our farm tours are preschoolers from 3-5 years old. We also have a few first and second graders. Many of them have never been on a farm or seen food growing. Some suburban families and schools do have vegetable gardens and those children love to tell about what they already know.

I tell prospective guides that tours for these young children are really nature walks through the farm. The children are naturally curious and their questions are opportunities to talk about endless topics: seeds, plant parts we can eat, where the fruits/vegetables come from, the seasons, why we don't walk on the beds, weeds and how we deal with them, where the meat they eat comes from, bugs and how we deal with them.

In the short time they are on our farm, we don't have to impart a lot of information, but we can help them learn something about what they're smelling, touching, tasting,



hearing and feeling about the weather that day. And also understand why we need farms and farmers. Everyone eats!

Green Eggs and Ham!

By Sam Sedon



Kids get green mustaches after trying green smoothies on the farm.

For me, working with kids in a farm setting is about getting them excited to try things that are unfamiliar, and to encourage them to eat healthy food. I have always found the best success is when kids get to harvest the vegetables themselves. I have helped many a picky eater learn to love kale chips, and to eat raw veggies straight from the earth. One of my favorite short lessons for elementary schoolers centers around being bold and making healthy choices. We first scout out greens; spinach or kale both work great. We harvest together, then gather around to read Dr. Seuss' classic - Green Eggs and Ham. Since the whole premise of the story is about trying something new, and green, it leads us right into making green smoothies with our harvest. I like to use a combination of apples, frozen bananas, ice, and almond milk along with the kale or spinach. I have never encountered a kid who didn't want to try them, or who didn't like it. It's always nice to send the kids home with the recipe too!

Showing Young Children Around

By Michael Lipsky

Plants are much more substantial than they appear to be. I illustrate this by pulling random weeds from the piles of gravel and loose stones near the lower gates of the farm. Because they are not rooted in soil, the weeds pull out easily, revealing their extensive roots.

Plants have many parts, and we can eat them all. As we walk from patch to patch we examine plantings that are raised for their roots (carrots are exciting), their leaves (we taste kale, spinach), their flowers (broccoli), and their fruits (beans, corn).

Plants can be special because of how they smell. We pick sprigs of the aromatic Sweet Annie--grown to add to our flower bunches. Children are surprised they smell so sweet. We rub between our fingers the leaves in the herb beds and smell our hands. On one tour last year a boy announced that the oregano he was sampling "smells like pizza."

Up close, chickens aren't scary. Typically, tours end at the chicken house. Like other tour guides I'll bring out a chicken, holding it tightly to my chest. I'll reassure the kids that chickens are calm if held firmly.

I'll tell them that they will be able to pet the chicken. I'll instruct them in moving their fingers gently from the head toward the tail, in the direction the feathers are aligned. Then I'll kneel so that the chicken and I are on their level. The children pay close attention.



Most children don't get to walk in the chicken house by themselves, but a calm child helps the chickens remain calm too

Now I'll be with each child separately from the others. It will be very quiet in the space occupied by the three of us. "What's your name?" I'll ask, as I guide the child's hand to stroke the chicken's neck.

Six of One, Half a Dozen of Another

By Katherine Collins

Prior to production farming, I worked as a garden-based educator for several years. The farm and garden lend themselves so well to all types of learning for folks of all ages. One of my favorite "back pocket" activities to do as a warm up exercise was called "Six of one, half a dozen of another." It's a lesson I learned from *The Growing Classroom*, a great resource put together by the folks at Life Lab in Santa Cruz, CA.

Hand out an empty egg carton to each student or pair of students. On the bottom of the carton, write two adjectives on tape and place one on each row of the carton. Words like "rough," "soft," "pungent" or "dull" are good places to start; you can vary the words to teach new vocabulary. I often liked to make the adjectives opposites but it's not necessary for the activity to be engaging. After establishing what the expectations are for what should or should not be picked, let the students explore the space and find things to put in each egg depression that match their adjectives. As a bonus, you can have the students trade their cartons with a classmate and see if they can guess their adjectives.



Teaching With Corn

By Sophia Maravell

I love corn, and I love sharing about corn with kids. I like to talk about all the different types of corn and ask the kids what kinds of corn they know: Sweet corn, popcorn etc. There are also flour corns, dent corns (often used for animal feed), and flint corns, (good ground in polenta and cornbread). There are hundreds of varieties of corn within each of those types- made of every color of the rainbow. Some are endangered just like endangered animals, and there are many varieties that have gone extinct.

First, I ask permission of the corn plant to pick an ear, and if the kids are young enough they love to ask too and can often even hear the answer. When we pick an ear I like to point out the silks of the corn, or the corn's hair, and how each individual strand of the corn silk is connected to a corn kernel, or seed, just like an umbilical cord to a belly button. If each silken strand of hair is not touched by a pollen molecule floating through the air from the tassel, then that kernel will be shriveled, unfertilized, and unable to be planted successfully the next spring. That's why corn plants need to be planted close together in mass, so they can help to pollinate each other. This is a good opportunity to ask the kids all the ways a plant can be pollinated and to talk about how the wind helps the pollen of the corn to spread. Passing

around the dry ear in the fall, I like to have the kids try to shell the kernels with their thumbs and guess how many ears one seed will grow.

Sometimes I talk a bit more about the history of corn in this region. All corn is from Mexico originally, and descends from a plant called Teosinte.

The Powhatans, who are a unified tribal group native to Northern Virginia, started planting corn along with beans and squash in river flood plains starting about 1,000 years ago. The squash is planted in between corn mounds and spreads out along the ground to help suppress weeds and keep moisture in the soil, the beans climb up the stalks of the corn and fix nitrogen in the soil which the corn uses.

It is always nice to send an ear of corn back with the teacher to plant next spring or pop and eat if it is popcorn. (Planting instructions: after fear of frost is gone in the spring, plant seeds 1" down and 6 inches apart in a block or circle with at least 16 seeds per block for best germination).



It is magical to dig up ginger at the end of the summer. Our soil grows it so beautifully

Let Them Dig Holes! By Vida Castro

If you've ever tried to teach kids about the soil, the most fun way to do it is to let them dig it up! Feel it! Smell it! Maybe even taste it! You can draw from their experience first, because making it personal will help it to stick in their memory better. "Have you ever grown something from soil? Have you ever played in the dirt and made pretend food with the soil?" After you hear about their own experiences, then you can speak about what you know that they might not: "Did you know that one of the reasons you could make these different toys with soil is because there is clay in the soil?" There were several times as a teacher, I felt like I was digging my own grave because I was lecturing about soil using information I learned from (continued on the internet. It's better to offer kids resources, and to let them dig their own holes; to be driven by their own curiosity, and to let them use the resources available to them (internet, library, parents, etc.) to explore and use in their own way. When I was teaching about soil, I had the kids analyzing carefully prepared soil samples, using a variety of tests from a worksheet that I found on the internet. . (Continued on page 4, bottom of the page)



Teachable Moments

By Jess Zielinski

While I was working at the urban farm belonging to Common Ground High School in Connecticut, the high school students would come down from classes to integrate the farm into their lessons. Some of the most memorable lessons were from the Spanish and French classes. We (on the farm) would take a quick survey of what tasks we would be performing during the class visit, as well as what fruits, veggies, plants, and tools we'd be working with, and we'd make a list in English on the farm whiteboard. The class would then do their best, with their teacher's assistance, to translate these words, and conjugate the verbs as necessary for conversation.

Another fun exploration was to search the "weedy" patches to find any of the "weeds" known to have fun uses (such as purslane - actually edible and nutritious). Then there could be a little chat about what surprises could be found growing in one's own yard at home. For some of the "weeds" with unknown uses, the students could suggest new uses...maybe it could be used to make a wreath, or a blade of grass can be turned into a musical instrument between your hands (for those of you that can pull this off, I know I struggle to...). While digging in the weeds, it was also fun time explore the parts of plants. When looking at the roots, we could share information about how the roots interact with the soil not only for structural support but also nourishment, and further share about how soil is full of life, from the bugs we can see (oh what fun to find bugs!) down to tiny organisms we cannot see with the naked eye. I heard one soil scientist liken soil to the plains of the Serengeti, with certain nematodes being a top predator like lions, feeding on herds of bacteria. It was fun for the kids to consider all the life there right beneath their feet, and perhaps in thinking of the soil as living, they'd be inspired to take good care of it!

Using Food and Farming to Teach Life Skills

By Sarah Waybright

1. Cutting an apple? Take the opportunity to talk about fractions - kids can count slices and easily see how quarters become eighths!
2. Grow microgreens on a sunny windowsill - skills honed include planning, planting, watering (consistency!), and patience. Try using radish, lettuce, and basil seeds - they sprout quickly, sometimes in just 3-5 days!
3. Do your kids know that butter comes from milk? Make your own by shaking heavy cream (or add some whole milk, too) in a jar - strain out butter, and use the "buttermilk" for baked goods!

4. See how water is taken up by roots and stems by placing a little food coloring in a cup, and adding a fresh-cut Napa cabbage leaf...the colored water will infuse the white leaf!
5. Do a blind taste test - use bandanas to cover spying eyes, then put 3-4 samples of cut veggies out for each child. See who can guess the most! For older kids and adults, try trickier selections - peppers of different colors, or leafy greens.



This vegetable is easy to recognize and delicious raw.

Let them Dig Holes! (continued from page 3)

Looking back at this now, the experiment was irrelevant to the kids' lives. Today, I would probably have groups of kids go out with shovels into the field, dig up different types of soil, and see what projects they could do with that soil. Since the topic is broad, kids might be interested in learning about pottery, or what things in the soil are needed for an eggplant to grow, or how to make good soil. When I tried to create very structured lesson plans that required kids to listen and regurgitate it back to me, it was very challenging. What easier and more interesting way to teach than to let kids learn about what interests them, and challenge them with tangible or relevant topics!