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Harvest helpers: Cambridge students learn about plant life cycles with CitySprouts

A mob of kindergarteners gathered Tuesday morning around dried Echinacea, mesmerized by the fact that inside each desiccated flower there were tiny seeds. But their attention quickly switched from the once vibrant purple flowers to the brown bunny running across the CitySprouts garden at the Morse Elementary School.

"A bunny! A bunny! A bunny!" the 18 students shouted, as their teacher instructed them not to chase the animal.

Neal Klinman, a kindergarten teacher at the Morse School, and Brad Pillen, garden coordinator for CitySprouts, managed to recapture the children's attention by looking at different aspects of the growth cycle and comparing and contrasting newer seeds that are not fully developed to dry ones. The goal, Klinman said, was to explore how seeds get around.

"They're learning how to look carefully at the details, and look deeper and deeper to find the details that are in the garden, like artistic scientists," Klinman said, as children squatted down, drawing what they were seeing in a notebook. Klinman is one of the many teachers in the Cambridge Public Schools who incorporate hands-on gardening lessons with the Massachusetts Common Core Standards, a framework that outlines what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade.

CitySprouts, a school and community program that integrates academic, health and environmental education in neighborhoods and public schools, helps maintain gardens in all of Cambridge's public schools with the exception of the high school. The organization's mission is to use the gardens to reinforce the schools' curricula, Pillen said.

"We don't teach just gardening lessons," Pillen said, while holding a handful of seeds. "We're working with teachers to try to find ways to use the garden with what they're doing in the classroom."

Subjects, for example, include science, where students explore the growth process and the cycle of life; social studies, where children learn about Native American seeds that grow in the area; art projects; and math, by graphing and measuring growth, Pillen said.

And for many students, spending time in the garden is their favorite part of the day.

"I love all the flowers, all the leaves, all the trees, all of the vegetables, all of the spices," Nazrawit Napir, 6, said in between sketching flowers. "It's just nature, and I just like all of the different seeds I see in the garden."

While many students explored the garden, Punom Talukdar, 6, squatted down near kale leaves, enthralled by the nearly microscopic seeds she found on the ground. But it was the growth process that completely baffled her.

"My favorite part was the seeds because they grow," Punom said quickly without lifting her gaze from the soil. "It's like you can plant them, and then you can make them really grow so you can have a big garden."

Principal Patricia Beggy said the garden has been at Morse School for approximately 11 years. However, Haggerty School on Cushing Street was the first public school in Cambridge to benefit from CitySprouts' services, she said.

Crops from the garden are typically used for cooking lessons and the school's monthly taste testing event, where kids get to sample different items, Beggy said. The school also donates harvested vegetables during the summer months to Food for Free, an organization that distributes groceries within local emergency food systems, she said.

Students who sign up for the Mayor's Summer Youth Employment Program also get to work as interns at the Morse School garden during the warm months.

"It's valuable to the curriculum as much as to the piece about experimental learning," Beggy said.

For more information, call the Morse School at 617-349-6575.

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Morse School third graders walk through their school's garden during a lesson led by Brad Pillen of CitySprouts on Tuesday, Oct. 14. (Wicked Local Staff Photo / Brett Crawford)

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