

SOU students learn and teach on 'The Farm'

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By Joe Zavala for the Mail Tribune

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Surrounded by fourth-graders from Helman Elementary Tuesday morning, Melissa Donner, a student in Southern Oregon University's environmental education double-master's program, demonstrated the proper way to pick an eggplant.

The fourth-graders — three girls and three boys — trained their eyes on Donner's hands as she illustrated the trick to the procedure. You have to twist, she explained, then pull. And if that doesn't work, keep twisting.

The students were then encouraged to give it a try, which they did with eagerness, if not precision.

"Remember the trick," Donner said, "and have patience."

They had plenty of plants on which to practice because Tuesday's class, taught by Rogue Valley Farm to School, was held at The Farm at Southern Oregon University, a 5½-acre organic farm that will soon be used as a community outreach tool for SOU's Sustainability Farm School.

The new program kicks off Wednesday, when a class from Ashland High School will visit The Farm for its first of many hands-on lessons. The two-month program, which will provide biweekly sessions for two Catalyst alternative education classes (about 15 students each) and wraps up in November, is being designed by Alessandro Broido, another student in SOU's environmental education master's program, and taught by his fellow SOU students, including Donner.

Though Tuesday's class was run by Rogue Valley Farm to School, the lessons provided a preview of sorts for Donner, an aspiring elementary school teacher. That's because the high school class is only the beginning, according to SOU Farm Director Nancy Shea, who says the farm school's target audience is kindergarten through 12th grade.

"We're going to help the kids maybe actually have a little piece of the farm," Shea said. "And kind of the cool thing is, at the high school they have a little place where they can start their own little garden, and they're going to do that. They're going to learn here, then (work the garden) there."

Catalyst teacher Alan Parowski, added Shea, wants to get the most out of the new program.

"They're going to actually do programs over the year," Shea said. "He wants them to come in the fall and then they'll learn about how we harvest and what this time of season is, then they'll come in the winter and they'll see how we plant a farm and start to do seeding in the greenhouse. And then in the spring, they'll be seeding. And his idea is that when the new kids come in the fall, they'll get to eat the stuff that was planted by the kids in the spring."

Noting the key differences between Farm to School's program and the one SOU will offer, Broido, who like Donner is scheduled to earn his master's degree in the spring of 2018, said the sustainability farm school will partner with local schools to offer a robust unit study that will teach sustainable farming and promote its many benefits.

The high school students, like Helman's fourth-grade class Tuesday, will start off by harvesting the ingredients they'll need for a pasta meal, which will be the highlight of their first visit. After that, they'll be led through the steps from seeding to harvesting. How much they'll get through and how deep they'll be able to go has yet to be determined — it's a pilot program, after all. But Broido has big plans.

First though, they'll eat a delicious meal made with the tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant and onions they'll pick from The Farm, off Walker Avenue across the street from Ashland Middle School. The property is owned by SOU and has been used for the last two years by Rogue Valley Farm to School for workshops.

"It's sort of a way to welcome them and to build some enthusiasm about coming," said Broido, who like all the SOU students in charge of the program is paid for about 10 hours of work per week.

Donner, whose main responsibility at the farm is to help coordinate the Rogue Valley Farm to School program, started working at The Farm about a month ago, and Tuesday's class was the third she's helped walk through The Farm's stations.

On Tuesday, about 25 students from Ellen Werner's fourth-grade class were divided into small groups and led through a series of stations, each of which highlighted a different stage of organic farming. While Werner's group learned how to properly peel and chop onions, Donner's group was busy catching bugs, after which they identified the species and talked about whether they were good for the garden or not.

At other stations, instructors showed students how to compost, pick eggplant and wash the harvest.

"It's a really, really fun program," Donner said. "I think the kids get a lot out of it, especially in the kitchen station, where they get to use knives and learn actual cooking skills that they can take home today. It's a little bit more difficult when we're out harvesting to kind of connect it back to their home, but the kitchen, I think, is a very exciting station."

Broido expects the sustainability farm school to be tweaked as it evolves, but he's excited about the potential.

"Like (Shea) said, this is all experimental," he said. "It's hard to know for sure if we're going to be able to do everything that we want to with this group. But with that being said, some of our other ideas are doing invertebrate surveys — having the students come out and collect data and observe what insects we have on the farm. We have lesson plans that will distinguish what's the difference between a pest invertebrate and a beneficial invertebrate.

"Also, we're coming up with ways to systematize our pest management strategies. For example, how many of our squash plants are infested with squash bugs? It's a real problem that we face on the farm that affects production, and we're hoping to use problems like that to create avenues for the students to engage in real scientific inquiries while contributing to the farm's overall production."

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