

The Zest S12E5

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Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest:, citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State today.

What does it take to grow confident, successful kids?

To grow successfully, kids need a good foundation, nourishment and a lot of care kind of like a garden. So when Tampa community activists Jeannette Bradley and Diana Kyle wanted to positively impact local schools, they decided to get their hands dirty. In 2018, the two founded SEEDFOLKids After School Garden experience.

The free program is the Signature initiative of Bradley's nonprofit [00:01:00] organization What We Could Be Exchange. SEEDFOLKids, combines hands-on gardening with real world learning in agriscience, sustainability, entrepreneurship, and teamwork. How cool is that? Is a 43-year-old woman, two old to participate, asking for a friend?

Looking throughout the school year, elementary students grow edible plants. In raised beds, participate in food system related field trips and guest led workshops and host school events like seed folk, kids market day when they sell the fruits and veggies and herbs of their labor along the way, they develop confidence, leadership skills, and a deeper connection to the food they eat and the environment around them. Several Tampa schools have hosted the SEEDFOLKids program. The very first was Edison Elementary Community School, where the program is still going strong. Shortly before the end of the 2024, 2025 school year, the Zest team visited Edison [00:02:00] to chat with the students and adults who are the heartbeat of the program.

Lisa Wilson: I am Lisa Wilson. I am the Community School Resource teacher here at Edison.

Jeannette Bradley: I'm Jeannette Bradley and I am a super volunteer here at Edison Elementary School. My program SEEDFOLKids, we do gardens here all year.

Dalia: Okay. So I don't know whose idea this was or how it all started, but just talk me through how the gardens began.

Jeannette Bradley: Ooh. Well, we were here let's say about four or five years ago, and we created a garden here on the campus, and our purpose is to integrate into the milieu, um, with a garden. We're giving them an opportunity to use the skills they're learning in the classroom, in the garden, and it's our hope that we are.

Creating leaders amongst the third and fourth graders here. Um, we were gone for a couple of years and then Lisa channeled us back into the. [00:03:00]

Dalia: Into the school. Lisa, how does this work? Did they choose to be in the program? How many kids are in the program? Is it an afterschool

Lisa Wilson: program? Yeah, so this year we were very strategic and intentional about choosing our students to be in the program.

We wanted to have students that were higher academically and maybe a little like mid or lower academically, and we wanted to pair them together so that they could. Mentor and learn leadership skills. So we reached out to the third and fourth grade teachers and had them recommend students that had leadership qualities and you know, were academically fitting the target students that we were looking for.

And then we invited them. And then once we got their slips in, we started the program. We started with, I believe we had

Jeannette Bradley: about 20,

Lisa Wilson: yeah, it was about 20, including. Okay,

Dalia: you had about 20 students and

Lisa Wilson: it's part of the curriculum during the day. It's an afterschool program, and like Ms. Jeannette [00:04:00] said, we, um, it supports what the students are learning in the classroom and it gives that practical, real world application.

So they're able to like. Put into practice what they're learning in the classroom as far as the scientific pieces of it and measuring and all of those

Dalia: aspects. Tell me about the school I've never been to. This school. I pull up, it says like Thomas Edison Community School. It's this gorgeous building. How old is this building?

Like a hundred years old.

Lisa Wilson: Yes, it's beautiful. We're actually going to be 100 next year in August, so we'll be celebrating our centennial. It'll be a very special year next year. We've been in this community all this time, I believe at different times. It was maybe different grade levels, but it's a true, uh, community school.

We don't have buses. The students either walk or they're driven here. As far as being a community school, what that really means for us is that we are here to support the whole child, so. We really focus on trying to remove barriers that [00:05:00] students may have to learning. So that's what it means to be a community school is to kind of focus on that whole child, and I believe this program kind of speaks to that and kind of helps with that as well.

Dalia: Yeah. Jeannette, what made you think we need to start a garden?

Jeannette Bradley: Actually it was, um, a book by Paul Fleischman. It's a sixth grade read and it's about a community of, um, residents who did not know each other, uh, immigrants in Cleveland, Ohio. They came together as a result of one child that planted a seed in an old empty rent infested lot, and we saw that lot as schools that were consistently DF schools and that that child was planting this.

Seed that actually brought the entire community together and that lot became a beautiful garden in the center of Cleveland. And so Diana and I, about, I would say 10 years ago, took that idea and made it a program. [00:06:00] That we thought we would bring actually to high schoolers at the time. And then about four or five years ago, we, um, were asked to bring it into the elementary schools.

Edison was our first school and we left for a little while, as I said before, and we are back. And I must say with Lisa, it has been probably the best year we've had. The entire time.

Dalia: Wow.

Jeannette Bradley: Okay. I'm gonna have to check out that book 'cause I'm from Cleveland, Ohio. Oh, you must, it's, um, called Seed Folks by Paul Fleischman.

Dalia: Oh, and that's where the name of the program comes from. Absolutely, absolutely dingding. Okay. Lisa, obviously. With gardening, there's a lot of like science and some math, but what are some of the other maybe unexpected lessons that the students are getting by attending to these plants?

Lisa Wilson: Well, they are in competition with each other, so each team of students is assigned a garden bed.

So the competition aspect of it is, I [00:07:00] think, important. So there. You know, self confidence, them being able to speak to the work that they're doing and articulate that they're asked to do that all throughout the program. Um, also we have the, the garden, the, um. The market days. Oh yes. So where the students are actually selling the products and the produce that they've grown.

So I can only imagine the sense of pride of, you know, cutting a cabbage head and handing it to your teacher and you know, for her to make dinner. Those things, I think you can't quantify that kind of learning. They're also, you know, they're making change. They're advertising, they're, they're doing a lot of different skills that are just like real life working skills.

They get the money that they raised, they had to decide what to do with it. So they have a voice in every aspect of the program. They've made it so that the students are very much part of their learning.[00:08:00]

Dalia: Wow. I was gonna ask you what happens to the food? They sell it to

Jeannette Bradley: the teachers, you know, our program so well.

Lisa Wilson: I do.

Jeannette Bradley: You you absolutely have. Um, this school has adopted this program as if it were made for this school, and we do appreciate that. But um, she's absolutely right. What we do is we go into schools like Edison and we look at. The milieu. We try to feel, get a feel for what does the school need, and we use the students to carry out what that need is.

We make sure that those students understand that what we're doing in that garden applies to what they do in the classroom, but also what they do at home and in the community as well. So we're building community through the students here at Edison. And what makes it so, um, I think unique is. That they're building this community, but this is a microcosm of a larger community that they someday will be a part of.

So their efforts are, [00:09:00] um, just going well beyond this great grade they're gonna get at the end of the school year. Yes, and we celebrate that.

Dalia: Oh, I love that. Okay. And, and today you're having kind of a celebration. You're making salsa with the produce, the tomatoes, the jalapenos from the garden. So that's so cool.

And I'm definitely gonna save some room for that, hopefully

for somebody who's never been in the garden. If I'm closing my eyes, can you paint a picture for me with your words, what's in the garden? What am I seeing? What am I touching and tasting?

Student #2: Okay, so first thing I would probably talk about is the star fruit tree and how it like grows quickly after you cut the fruits off and you can peel the star fruit really easily.

Um, one thing I wish was in the garden though was dragon fruit. 'cause they're also very easy to peel and also. The [00:10:00] cabbage. The cabbage is pretty good. I think we grew carrots. They were good.

Dalia: Is there a food that you had never had before until you grew it in the garden? Um, star fruit.

Wow. What do you do with star fruit?

Student #2: All right. So first thing, if you wanna peel it with your hands, you can, but you most likely would slice it up like normally. And if you slice it down the middle, it looks like a star. So that's why it's called a star fruit. Do you like to cook? Yes ma'am. What do you like to cook? Um, breakfast, because my mom likes breakfast.

Dalia: Wow. What do you make for your mom on Mother's Day, I made her pancakes, eggs, and sausage.

Little bowl of star fruit on the side. Mm-hmm. Okay. Okay. Well, I gave her some strawberries. Okay. Okay. Oh, that's nice. Okay. Thank you. You did great. Anything else you wanted to mention? Um, that I love my mom dearly. Aw, [00:11:00] we love that answer.

Okay. You know the drill. Tell me your name, what grade you're in, what you like to do for.

Adrian: So my name is Adrian. I'm in third grade. The thing I like to do, play basketball. Nice. The sunflowers. They're very tall. They are very tall. They're probably like eight feet tall. I know.

Dalia: How does it feel that earlier this year you planted these seeds and now they're like taller than an NBA player and you did that?

Adrian: I feel proud of myself. For planting those seeds, like I feel proud.

Dalia: You should feel proud. Is there a food that you had never tried before until you grew it here at school?

Adrian: Zebra. Tomatoes.

Dalia: What? I don't even know what that is.

Adrian: So you're like little tomatoes with dark green stripes on them.

Dalia: Oh. What's something you would wanna cook with an ingredient from the garden?[00:12:00]

Adrian: Tomato, the tomatoes. I would want to cook them with spaghetti.

Dalia: You would wanna make a marinara sauce. Ooh, that does sound good.

Kamaya: My name's Kamaya. I'm in the fourth grade and I'm 10 years old, and what I like to do is I like to do art with my best friend, Aja.

Dalia: Wow. So how does working in the garden help you with your other school subjects?

Kamaya: Well, in science, we do plants and some plants that we grow in the garden, [00:13:00] be in the science book.

So it kind of helps me. So when we have to test about it, I already knows about it. My favorite is the tomatoes. Well, it's the flour and then it's the tomatoes.

Dalia: It's pretty cool that you can eat flowers, huh?

Kamaya: Yes.

Dalia: Yeah. What's a plant you wish was in the garden?

Kamaya: Um, I know it was pineapples, but I wish it was mango.

Dalia: Oh, me too. Mangoes are the best.

Darrell: My name Darrell. I'm in fourth grade.

Dalia: What's one of your favorite memories from being in the garden?

Darrell: It's from like when we first planted everything we built, like the beds, the flower beds, and we set everything up. What did you like about that? Like the time it took and like how you could see the transformation from the seedlings and the baby plants to now.

Dalia: Wow. Does that remind you of anything else in life? Like, do you ever think about myself? What do you mean

Darrell: myself?

Dalia: Say more. Say more.

Darrell: When I was a baby and now.

Dalia: And now you're a [00:14:00] fourth grader, almost fifth grader. Yeah. That's pretty cool. Okay, so tell me a little bit about you. Your name, what grade you're in, what you like to do for fun.

Alaysia: My name is Alicia and I'm in fourth grade, and my favorite thing to do is draw with my best friend, Kamaya.

Dalia: Oh, you're best friends. I love that. Okay. How has working in the garden helped you in the rest of your life, either in school or in other parts of your life?

Alaysia: It helps me in both at home and at school, because at school it helps me on tests and science tests and also, um, studying in our books.

Dalia: What's your favorite plant in the garden?

Alaysia: The sunflowers.

Dalia: Why?

Alaysia: Because they're so bright and pretty

Dalia: Aw. Just like you. I love it. Thank

Student 4: you. Okay, let's come over back to the guys. Hi, my name is Jersey. I'm in fourth grade. I like going outside. Okay. Traveling and hanging out.

Dalia: What is your favorite [00:15:00] memory from working in the garden?

Can you think of one day that was like the best? Maybe when something. Appeared like a tomato appeared or, or you noticed something different?

Student 3: Yeah, I say the cabbage, like the cabbage. It like it bloomed a lot.

Dalia: Wow.

Student 3: Pretty

Dalia: cool.

Student 3: Like it opened.

Dalia: What's a plant that you would like to have in the garden?

Alaysia: Something that I would like to have in the garden will be. Roses because they're pretty, and I think they will make our garden looks more prettier than it's,

Dalia: you were starting to tell me this when we were outside. Now we're sitting in the library in the air conditioning. Thank you. But, um, it's beautiful. So you have some plants that. You may not think of as edible, but actually are like sunflowers and marigold, but it's also adding beauty [00:16:00] to the school property.

Why is that important?

Lisa Wilson: Well, I can tell you our teachers, when they come in, they, they just beam with pride and they show people the garden when they come in and, you know, they ask the kids about their garden. And so it definitely, the

confidence piece, but I think it cheers us all up. I mean, who doesn't like to see beautiful flowers everywhere and the, the sunflowers every single day?

I think I've taken pictures.

Jeannette Bradley: Oh, I took a bunch. Just being here. I wanna add to that. Every teacher, the resource officers, they all have pictures and I said, you know what? You need to load them onto the site for the school because they've taken pictures when the gardens were just dirt until they have grown to.

Flourish the way that they have. But you know, I wanna shout out to our partner, Amgen, who also helped us early in the year, beautify the school in the front entryway where the kids come and go. We wanted to make sure that they [00:17:00] felt great about their schools, so we added flowers there. And the sunflowers and the zinnias that you saw, they are there because we decided two months ago that they're going to take.

Tests in two months. We need this area to invite them and make them feel really proud of their schools. So we planted them and lo and behold, they were blooming by test time.

Dalia: Oh, so many lessons. I mean, I was gonna ask you like why a garden? Why not a knitting club or something else? But I mean, you're already sort of answering it because there are so many less.

In a garden, and imagine even for us as adults, like, Hey, I have a hard season coming up. Let me plant something beautiful that I can look forward to seeing when I go outside every day. You, Jeannette mentioned dirt. And there is a time when a garden is just dirt. So Lisa, as an educator, how do you keep the kids motivated to keep working the land or studying or whatever other hard thing they're trying to do when all you [00:18:00] see is dirt?

Lisa Wilson: I think you know the promise of what's to come, but also the fact that they were the ones that built the actual garden bed itself. Put the dirt in there. They, they started from the ground up and so they couldn't wait to see is this really gonna work? Is this really going to, um, to come out the way that they intended?

And what I thought was so amazing is that each garden bed, there's teams, but the students were allowed to arrange the plants and flowers in there. Their own way. It was almost like a design challenge. And as it came out into, you don't

know what it's gonna be like until later. Um, and our entire staff got to vote on best cabbage, best, Korn, best, all the things.

And you know, I'm excited the kids are gonna get awards for it, but it's. A complete school effort like we are all in. Wow. Oh, I love that.

Dalia: Okay. How can I get my kids to do this at home if they don't have a, an [00:19:00] edible garden at their school? What is like a piece of this that we could do at home?

Jeannette Bradley: Um, there are small garden beds that you can, you don't even need to buy a garden bed actually.

You can just carve out a space in your backyard and, um, just. Plant and, you know, till the soil and plant, uh, seeds and allow those children to see those seeds grow. They can, but get them ex involved in that process by deciding what they want to plant. And we did that with the kids as well. They got to, uh, choose exactly what they wanted to plant.

Dalia: And they were so proud. They took me around and you can see the video on our social media at the US podcast on Instagram and Facebook, but they took me around and they would say, oh, you like that cabbage? Well come over here and see my cabbage. Come over and see my ca. They are, I love that. Okay, last question for both of you.

You're so busy. Educators are insanely busy. Jeannette, I, I think I was introduced to you first as an artist. Yes. You're a visual artist. Absolutely amazing. Mm-hmm. [00:20:00] So why are you both passionate about this? It takes up a lot of time and energy. What's in it for you? Well, for

Jeannette Bradley: me, I'm, um, I am an artist, but I'm also a community activist and I chose education activism as my, uh, thing to do in this final trimester of my life.

I want to see the kids in communities like. East Tampa do well. And I think gardening is a great opportunity or a great tool for communicating not just with the children, but with the staff, but also with the parents as well. The kids that are in our program. Uh, one just today said to me, my dad is making a garden for my mom.

Aw. And that to me and to watch and to listen to them talk about how they're helping is everything, in my opinion. But to have them grow and, and to watch

them grow through the things that we're doing that [00:21:00] complement what they're doing is, um, in essence what it is that we're here for. It's my opportunity to actually.

Have boots on the ground, so to speak, and song's gonna be stuck in my head for the rest of the day, really. But, um, and, and, and see real change within the year. We get to start out at the beginning of the year, watch the kids grow and progress through the end of the year and, and just. Help them every step of the way.

It's like when they're planting that seed in dirt and then they're watching it grow and they're noticing some of the gardens growing a little slower than the others, and then having conversations around that. Um, providing nutrients to the garden the way that we are. Planting seeds in them. It's using just that language to, um, get the kids to understand that it's not just you, it is just how life is.

And we could see that through the garden. It's my opportunity to show activism in [00:22:00] the, in the educational system. But being in elementary school, I think is, is the key. Um, because if we can change their lives now at third and fourth grade before they get to middle school, where it gets really kind of crazy for kids, if we can get them to say, you know what?

I can almost make something out of nothing, um, that changes the game for a lot of them.

Dalia: Well said. Lisa, what about for you?

Lisa Wilson: So I wanted to start a garden here at Edison a few years ago, and we did, they were here, but then like they said, they had left. And so I started working on a garden grant. I got the grant, but didn't have, I have know nothing about gardening, so I prayed a lot and then they showed up and I was so happy that they did, but my, my reason behind wanting the garden itself.

Was like she was saying, it has so many connections to so many other things because you can kind [00:23:00] of piggyback those lessons that you're learning. There's just. Too many good lessons coming out of it. And so I thought that would be a really good thing to have here. And you know, this areas is kind of like a food desert, so there's not a whole lot of that fresh produce.

We have a food pantry here and it's nice that we can sometimes offer the, the fresh produce from here as well. So it supplements our, um, food pantry

as well. This is so great. I want to try the salsa. Should we go? We do, yes. Let's, let's have some.

SEEDFOLKids after School Garden Experience is the signature initiative of the nonprofit organization What We Could Be Exchange. And if you could use a little extra dose of joy today and really who couldn't, then you need to see the video tour that the kids took us on of the garden. It is. Full of joy and smiles and bright colors, and I know it's just what you need. You can find that [00:24:00] video on Facebook or Instagram.

Just search the Zest podcast and if you wanna do some cooking with the kids in your life, the SEEDFOLKids community has shared their recipe for easy to tomato salsa. It's. Fresh. It's healthy. It's a perfect recipe to make with the kids in your life. And you can find that recipe on our website, the zest podcast.com.

I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. Thhe Zest is a production of WUSF copyright 2025, part of the NPR network.