

School Orchard and Farm to School Join Forces at Auburndale High



At Auburndale High School, apples get autopsies. “We want to find out what went wrong, and if this is a deal-breaker disease,” Mark Cournoyer, Auburn-dale’s agriculture teacher, said. Students learn through their apple dissections that many of the seemingly imperfect fruit are perfectly suited for cider, sauce, and other apple iterations. Students will have a first hand in creating these apple recipes, as well as in trying out new techniques to manage pests and maintain a healthy orchard.

October is the perfect time to celebrate both local fruit and Farm to School successes, and Auburndale has hit the ball out of the park on both accounts. The apples from its school orchard that are served whole in the school lunch line – for students to enjoy on the spot, or take home for a snack –are a good place to begin the story.

Before apples show up on lunch trays, agriculture students—an elective that involves three high school and two junior high school classes each year—spend time learning hands-on orchard management skills. In late winter, they prune. When the weather warms enough for insects, they practice integrated pest management techniques such as catching cottling moths with bottles full of cider vinegar, sugar, and a banana peel, or painting red solo cups with adhesive to trap apple maggots. (The latter technique was a lesson in resourcefulness as well as pest control – the red cups taking the place of a more expensive commercial orchard product.) Students also learn grafting, returning home with seedling fruit trees to plant in their own yards.

The impact that Auburndale’s school orchard has had on students shows up in the connections between the classroom and home. Working in an orchard and creating their own value-added products such as applesauce and cider are stories that get repeated around the dinner table. “If you can get them to tell their grandma, parent, aunt or neighbor about what they’ve done in class, that’s



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something they will look back on and remember. It made a difference enough that they're willing to share," Cournoyer said. "Kids who have had this experience in high school, in five or ten years, they might have their own house and maybe want their own trees."

Experience with fruit trees at a young age certainly made a difference in Cournoyer's life. Raised in nearby Wisconsin Rapids and employed at an orchard during middle and high school, fruit trees were on his agenda since he joined the Auburdale staff fifteen years ago. "We started by going out to orchards to learn about pruning," he said. "Soon it became apparent that it would be easier for us to have our own orchard and take our field trip right on the grounds." So in 2002, Cournoyer and his students planted their first fruit trees near the football field. "Then the Farm to School initiative came along," Cournoyer said, "and we were able to expand from 20 to 50 trees, including pears, plums, apricots and peaches. Unfortunately a lot of our peaches died in the cold temperatures this winter – but it all becomes part of the lesson I try to teach my kids about farming."

Farm to School grants have provided funding for other projects as well. For example, Cournoyer was able to purchase enough tools so that an entire class could learn about the farm-to-table journey hands on in a special class called "Harvest, Process, Preserve," where students create everything from sauerkraut to salsa. Farm to School funding also helped the school purchase a grinder that they use to create apple cider, potato pancakes, and even sausage.

Sausage is not something that is usually associated with Farm to School, much less with school orchards. But at Auburdale, where 75% of the student population goes hunting each November, there is a strong connection to local meat. Most students take their deer to a processor and get back cuts of meat. But in Cournoyer's class, students learn to do much of that processing themselves—often with the animal they hunted— and take the meat back home to the freezer. Last year, three

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students presented some of the sausages they had made at the Wisconsin Association of School Boards' gathering in Milwaukee. Including a cranberry-apple sausage made with apples from—where else?—the school orchard.

While Auburndale also has a school garden—to which agriculture students recently added low-maintenance perennials such as rhubarb and horseradish—Cournoyer encourages schools to consider the benefits of fruit trees: “Everyone will say, you need a school garden. But you have to think about what will happen in the summer. The beauty of the orchard is that we get all our work done during the school year, and we’re able to come back in the fall and see ‘the fruits of our labor,’ as they say.”

“I go by George Washington Carver—‘Do common things uncommonly well,’ and ‘Anything that helps put something in the lunch pail is valuable,’” Cournoyer said. Indeed—just two or three schoolyard fruit trees can help transform almost any lunch into something exceptional.

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