

Horicon High: Solving the Summer Maintenance Challenge



The Horicon High School Garden has it all: 1.5 acres full of sweet corn, squash, beans, peas, carrots, onions, radishes, peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, herbs, kale, lettuce, spinach, cauliflower, broccoli, kohlrabi, garlic, pumpkins and strawberries.

This farm-sized garden is the ambitious project of students in the school's FFA and agriculture programs. Students choose the seeds, care for transplants in the school greenhouse, and participate in hands-on lessons covering topics such as companion planting and pest management. In the fall, garden produce is used in school lunches.

The school district has an exploratory agriculture class required for all seventh grade students, as well as a horticulture elective for high school students. If this were the end of the story, Horicon's garden would already be a phenomenal program.

However, the most inspiring chapters come in the months of June, July, and August. No school faces an easy task when it comes to summer garden maintenance, but managing over 65,000 square feet of growing space feels a little mind-boggling, even for the seasoned gardener. Now in its second season, the garden's presence in the cafeteria has drawn more students to the garden, making their way willingly back to school during summer vacation.

"We didn't have a lot of help from students when we first started the program," said agriculture teacher and FFA advisor Alice Doudna, "but after we had the food in the lunch program, they were like, 'this is way better than the stuff that is shipped in, we want to help.'"

Doudna encouraged the students to sign up for the two week summer class she



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was organizing, called Delicious Nutritious Horicon – modeled after the Delicious Nutritious Wisconsin program, but tailored for local fare. Twelve students signed up – quadrupling last year’s number – and volunteered to work in the garden every morning for the remainder of the summer, after class was over.

“They told me they just sit at home watching T.V. anyway, and that they might as well be doing something,” Doudna said. Students volunteers go home with more than dirt under their fingernails: for every five hours they log, Doudna makes sure they get a bag full of veggies. The rest of the summer’s harvest is sold by students at the local farmer’s market, and the profits are used to purchase next year’s seeds and supplies.

The FFA program is also crucial to the garden’s success. Sixteen FFA students from Horicon are currently working toward proficiency in horticulture, a skill for which they must log 100 hours and show competency in at least ten garden-related skills. The FFA is also able to hire a student Garden Manager, as well as a Greenhouse Manager, who play a big role in weeding, watering, bookkeeping, and other essential tasks. These students receive 10% of the garden’s vegetable and plant sale profits as a scholarship when they graduate, and the skills added to their FFA resume have the potential to help them garner additional scholarships in the future.

While not every school has a FFA and an agriculture program, the story of Horicon’s garden is universal in that the energy behind the garden comes from the kids. When asked about the potential of adult volunteers, Doudna stuck to the principles she follows: “I try to have it be all student-led. They’re very proud of it. It’s their project, and I don’t want them to be intimidated by a bunch of adults being there.”

Sorry, adults – guess you’ll have to meet them at the farmer’s market!

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