

## Brodhead FFA: “Diggin’ in the Dirt”



Early each summer morning, Becky Wellnitz walks into her classroom in Brodhead, Wisconsin and puts some seeds into a jar. When her Diggin’ in the Dirt students arrive, the first thing they do is peek in the jar and guess the number of seeds. “Peas, sunflower seeds, marigold seeds, sprouting potatoes...the potatoes were easy,” she laughs. But you won’t see Wellnitz’s summer school students in the classroom for long. After investigating the eyes on the seed potatoes in the guessing jar, you will find them out in the garden, planting, watering, or harvesting the spuds they grow in their special straw bale gardens (a technique they have found very successful for this crop and its horticultural cousin, the tomato). Later, you will find them cutting potatoes to make their own French fries for a mid-morning snack.

“We try to take all the lessons full circle,” Wellnitz says. “The kids get so excited when they are a part of the whole process.” After students learn how peppers, tomatoes, and onions grow, they chop veggies for their own garden salsa, while a lesson on the differences between field corn, sweet corn, and popcorn is followed – of course! – by popping their own corn. One year, in an eye-opening moment, Wellnitz asked her freshman-level agriculture class to trace all the ingredients in several common foods, such as pretzels. “No kid in our class could tell me where flour came from to make pretzels,” Wellnitz said. Not anymore. Thanks to an FFA senior project, the Brodhead school garden is now home to a pizza garden, where triangle-shaped garden beds are planted with tomatoes, onions, and wheat.



Brodhead is a small community of 3,000 residents and plenty of dairy farms, but many students are two or even three generations removed from farming. When Wellnitz started teaching agriculture and advising the school’s FFA three years ago, she wanted to make sure that agriculture education was a part of every student’s experience. “Not everybody is going to be a farmer,” Wellnitz—who runs her own dairy farm when she is not teaching—said, “but everybody is going to be involved in food through eating.”

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*This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit [www.wischoolgardens.org](http://www.wischoolgardens.org).*



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While Wellnitz’s position is only part-time, she makes a big impact on the school district. When she started her Diggin’ in the Dirt summer school class three years ago, she was amazed to see that each of the four sessions were completely full, involving over 100 incoming first through sixth graders in a 21-day ag education experience. Some students even chose to take the class again the following summer. “The kids really enjoy what they are doing, and working out in the garden helps them focus,” Wellnitz said. “They can talk and ask questions, but their hands are busy. Honestly, this wouldn’t be successful if the kids were not a part of it.”

Students also get the chance to lead other students out in the garden, with high school FFA members helping elementary students do tasks like weeding and planting. In keeping with the spirit of learning gardens, sometimes student co-leadership turns into a teachable moment for everyone. “One day,” Wellnitz remembers, “I sent the high schoolers to go weed the pizza garden with the younger kids. But they didn’t know how to tell the difference between the onions and the weeds. We all replanted the onions together. They knew the difference after that!”

Overall, Wellnitz says the program “is bringing awareness to students of where their food does come from. I really think having them try a pepper for the first time, or even appreciate how much time and effort goes in to having food like lettuce.”

The Brodhead garden was one of seven schools in Wisconsin to receive the State Superintendent’s Standing Up for Rural Education Award in 2014. The Brodhead school garden has also received grants from the Wisconsin Farm Bureau and the local FFA Alumni. “Even though our summer school program doesn’t have a budget,” Wellnitz said, “there is a ton of a grant money available if you are willing to fill out the paperwork.” Wellnitz has developed and collected a wealth of materials and resources from her summer school garden classes, and she is happy to share. You can reach her at [bwelnitz@brodhead.k12.wi.us](mailto:bwelnitz@brodhead.k12.wi.us).

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