

Explore Ecology School Gardens Program wins Local Food Hero Award



Students learn about organic food as they work on a school garden as part of an Explore Ecology program.

Excited students marvel at the butterflies, bees and hummingbirds when they walk into their school garden for an Explore Ecology lesson.

The birds and insects are visiting the plants the kids grew from seeds.

When the lid of the compost bin is opened, the students gasp at the sight of the world of vermicompost creatures.

And thanks to the garden, the students try new and healthy foods such as kale, parsley and passion fruit.

Explore Ecology garden educators teach children how to grow organic food at 30 schools in Santa Barbara County.

Students learn about everything from seed saving and planting, to composting, nutrition, plant care, harvesting and cooking.

This year, the enthusiastic garden educators are being honored with the 2022 Local Food Heroes Award. The presentation will take place at 2 p.m. March 20 as part of the 14th annual Santa Barbara Community Seed Swap.

"We are so honored to receive this recognition. Every school day, our Garden Educators can be found on campuses throughout the county, inspiring children by teaching them how to grow organic food!" said Lindsay Johnson, executive director of Explore Ecology, in a news release.

"Students learn how to save seeds, take care of plants, and then enjoy the bounty of their work. Kids try lots of new food in the garden. Kale is really popular as well as passion fruit. You could say that school gardens make science delicious."

The seed swap will take place from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 20 at the Santa Barbara Community Arts Workshop, 631 Garden St., Santa Barbara. This will be an indoor/outdoor event and will follow COVID-19 protocols.

"I am delighted every time I see my students' faces light up when I grab a giant handful of worm castings, teeming with red wigglers and roly-polys," said Angie Ouellette, the Explore Ecology garden coordinator. "I like watching how children move

wigglers and roly-polys," said Angie Ouellette, the Explore Ecology garden coordinator. "I like watching how children move from reluctant observers to enthusiastic scientists when they realize that they know the names of these creatures. It's amazing to see how quickly they connect the magic of composting their leftovers from lunch to the delicious food they are growing in their garden and how this connection excites their curiosity even more.

"Making connections like these gets students' wheels turning as they wonder how else does nature recycle. I love watching them take this knowledge further, especially in the way they interact with each other and other living things in the garden, making connections on their own and then excitedly sharing these discoveries with their peers.

"Each day in the garden contains a mystery, something new to be discovered and explored, which makes my job as co-pilot so darn fun and something I will cherish always."

For 14 years, the Santa Barbara Permaculture Network has held a seed swap for the region. Community members are encouraged to attend the event and become part of the seed saving movement. Attendees can bring seeds, plants, cuttings and garden knowledge to swap. If they don't have any seeds to share, they can still attend and will end up with some seeds.

The event includes informational plant and seed related displays by local groups with many sharing valuable seed-saving techniques that encourage local gardeners to grow out and harvest seeds for future gardens and seed swaps. There will also be lectures, workshops, children activities and live music.

Co-sponsors of the event include Island Seed & Feed, Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, Blue Sky Biochar, Santa Barbara Aquaponics, Explore Ecology, Art from Scrap and the Santa Barbara Permaculture Network.

"The magic of seeds! They are our past, they are our future. Like a small computer chip, seeds are tiny but contain vast amounts of information. When people grow and then save seeds, they become a part of an ancient tradition of stewardship," said Margie Bushman, co-founder of the Santa Barbara Permaculture Network. "The Seed Swap wants to help keep that tradition alive and keep our community food secure with seeds adapted to our own region, climate and soils."

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