

The Newsmagazine of Long Beach Island and Southern Ocean County

Ethel A. Jacobsen Elementary Students Grow and Learn in Schoolyard Garden

New 'Farm-to-Table' Collaborations With Sodexo and Small Axe Peppers

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By Juliet Kaszas-Hoch



HARVESTERS: (From left) Pre-K3 students Avery Odell and Jaylen Scharschmidt pick tomatoes in the garden at the E.J. School in Surf City. (Supplied Photo)

All the many vegetables students are currently harvesting from the Ethel A. Jacobsen Elementary School garden in Surf City began as seeds planted between February and April. The seedlings were tended to in a light garden in one of the E.J. classrooms until, in June, all grades took to the outdoor garden to help transplant the plants.

Now, with the new school year in full swing, small hands are back in the dirt, with a couple of new "farm-to-table" collaborations – with food service provider Sodexo and NYC-based hot sauce company Small Axe Peppers – stemming from the schoolyard garden.

"E.J. began this year's gardening events with Back-to-School Night, where we were able to distribute bunches of garlic, beautiful acorn squash and packets of kale seeds as a giveaway to parents in attendance," said Bianca Aniski, school nurse and garden guru.

Soon after came Farm-to-School Week, "with all students either touring, harvesting, snacking or in some way, shape or form linking the curriculum to garden-based learning," Aniski explained. Through the partnership with Sodexo, the pre-kindergarten classes harvested tomatoes to be served in cups to students; fajitas will showcase the purple and green peppers picked by the second-graders, along with carrots and salsa; and Friday school lunch will feature fresh basil from the garden as a pizza topping, courtesy of grade one.

Kindergarten activities, meanwhile, "will include hunting for 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar,' with live action chomping in our cabbage patch, and an introduction to our robust butternut squash volunteer named 'Sophie,' who emerged from the compost pile," said Aniski, to go along with readings of the books *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle and *Sophie's Squash* by Pat Miller.

"Thank you, Sodexo, for patiently working with our budding botanists, creative chefs and future farmers!" she added.

"Sodexo has always supported our garden and has cleaned and helped distribute various foods for taste tests," said E.J. Principal Frank Birney.

Aniski also mentioned the elementary school's new partnership with Small Axe Peppers, which "donates seeds to gardens with the intent to use the peppers to create hot sauces. The sale of these sauces helps to fund other urban community gardens.

"The E.J. Garden peppers were so plentiful that we were able to donate pounds of peppers for this spicy collaboration. A shipment of hot, hot, hot peppers were sent on their way to the Bronx to be whipped into a hot sauce by Chef King Phojanakong."

As the Small Axe website, smallaxepeppers.com, notes, the company believes "that building communities cannot be done with just bricks and mortar. In order to be successful, communities are built by people working together. Small Axe donated its first seedlings to five community gardens in the Bronx about five years ago, and has grown exponentially since then, as a new economic model for urban farming was born."



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John A. Crotty, a company founder, said Small Axe Peppers now works with more than 175 gardens throughout the country, with Phojanakong – Crotty's nursery school mate – creating "perfectly blended, just right" hot sauces.

Most importantly, said Crotty, "the whole basis of what we set out to do was partnerships like with the (E.J.) school. All of us being connected is really powerful, aspirational and hopeful. This is what the success of this is all about. This is what we wanted to do from the start."

Back at E.J., Principal Birney remarked, "Garden-based learning offers so many advantages to our students. Not only do they get to learn and understand health, nutrition and environmental awareness, but they also receive academic enrichment and use different or new learning styles."

Physical education teacher James LaMarco, he added, "has done a tremendous job taking the students out to the garden for health class and teaching the students about health and nutrition while having fun planting and harvesting in the garden. All of the teachers try to utilize the students' excitement about the garden and not only teach lessons out there, but find ways to add to our curriculum."

"We are so fortunate at E.J. to have the opportunity to expose the students to the garden-based learning," said LaMarco. "The students enjoy the aspect of incorporating the garden into our health lessons ... and the process of trying fruits or vegetables they might have been hesitant about or not tried before."

The school staff also offered its gratitude to the volunteers who tended to the garden over the summer, with Aniski giving "a great big thank you to: Katie, Owen and Cooper Holloway; Ingrid Kaszas and Greta Jones; Jill, Lina and Nicole Wright; Marsinta Panjaitan; Alaina and Anaya Mehta; Chris Halpin; Ed Aniski; Lisa Boyd; Joanne Miller; Katie McClellan; Shelley Smith; Nicole and Lincoln Johnson; and Stephanie and Alex Chung."

Katie Holloway, a second-grade teacher in the district, said she "jumped at the opportunity to care for the E.J. Garden over the summer months. Once a week I would bring my own children to water, weed and harvest. They, too, were so excited to volunteer, and track the garden's progress each week. On many occasions I would be stopped by vacationers admiring the garden; they had nothing but amazing things to say. I explained that this garden is a group effort and something we are so proud of. What I love so much about this project is that the E.J. Garden has a great way of bringing our students, staff and community together.

"When I started my career at E.J. just two years ago," Holloway continued, "I knew right away that the garden project was something I needed to be part of. I feel so fortunate to have this incredible resource for my second-grade students. Some of our favorite garden activities are planting, harvesting, taste testing or even reading one of our favorite books. They truly love our time in the garden."

— **Juliet Kaszas-Hoch**

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