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## Columbia Elementary School Hosts First Satellite Community Garden



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas (third from right) at the ribbon-cutting ceremony May 25 at Columbia Elementary School, where he is joined by students, teachers and administrators from the campus and the Val Verde Unified School District.

The City of Perris dedicated its first "satellite community garden" at Columbia Elementary School May 25, achieving another milestone in its efforts to bring healthy food choice and options to its residents.

"This is a great day for our City, our residents and our children," said Mayor Michael Vargas, one of the dignitaries at the ribbon-cutting. "This is a fantastic opportunity to educate our youngsters about the importance of eating healthy. It's a very exciting day for us."

Perris officials, who last year unveiled a community garden at the City Hall Campus, have embarked on a mission to establish 30 other gardens before the end of next year. Perris representatives have reached out to more than 10 educational and faith-based organizations in recent months to complete its "Healthy Cities & Counties Challenge."

Columbia Elementary School students took on the challenge in October and created a garden containing tomatoes, onions, oregano, beans, cabbage and herbs, which student green thumbs lovingly water every morning.

Vargas was joined by students, teachers and administrators from Columbia, the Val Verde Unified School District and representatives from Eastern Municipal Water District, who worked with the Bureau of Reclamation to obtain a grant for the garden.

Perris City Manager Richard Belmudez, Assistant Director of Administrative Services Isabel Carlos and members of the City's Nutrition Education Obesity Prevention (NEOP) team also attended.

Vargas said their school garden will teach them several important lessons. They will learn about the benefits of trading chips and cookies for fruits and vegetables, enjoy seeing the crops grow until harvested and realize the benefits of using water wisely through the use of drought-resistant crops.

Representatives from local and regional groups already have toured the City-campus garden, known officially as the Perris Green City Farm Program, and given it rave reviews. Riverside County Department of Public Health call Perris one of the leading cities in the country in promoting the benefits of exercise and healthy eating.

"It's nice to know we are taking the lead in a very important issue-healthy nutrition," Vargas said. "It's a good feeling to know other communities are coming over to see what we're doing. No, it's a great feeling."

Columbia Elementary School Principal Thelma Almuena thanked the City for inspiring the staff to create the garden.

"This is truly a community event," she said. "I look forward to further collaboration between our school and the City of Perris."



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas addresses the crowd at Columbia Elementary School prior to the dedication of the satellite garden site: "This is a great day for our City, our residents and our children."

### Cooking Lessons, Harvesting Crops

The City campus community garden, which recently celebrated its first anniversary, has served as the site of several "Chef in the Garden" healthy-cooking demonstrations which have attracted hundreds of residents.

The City's first Spanish-language cooking lesson took place on May 24 and a week earlier, students from May Ranch Elementary School stopped by to harvest a variety of crops, completing the first Perris school field trip to the garden.

May Ranch administrators have expressed interest in starting a satellite garden at the campus so it made perfect sense to send a group of third through fifth-graders to the Green City Farm Program.

Students planted tomato seeds and plucked lettuce from growing towers.

The May Ranch visitors included Eva Siapno and her son, Samuel, 10.

Mom said the family is taking the lead from Samuel, reading nutrition facts on product labels and making healthier choices like avoiding soda.

"He is really interested in gardening," Eva Siapno said. "His interest in gardening has affected my whole household. My husband has even lowered his cholesterol!"

Perris staffers Arcenio Ramirez, Armando Panchi and Crystal Lopez whipped up a healthy meal to about 35 residents who came to the Spanish-language cooking lesson, preparing spaghetti-like zucchini with ground turkey, olive oil, onions, tomatoes and spices.

The meal was filling and tasty. Several people asked for seconds.

During the course of the evening's program, Perris nutrition experts instructed the audience about the need to add fruits and fiber to diets while limiting fats and reducing soda, chips and cookies. They also emphasized the importance of reading nutrition labels on product choices.

About 15 students and parents from Rob Reiner Children & Families Center were among those in attendance.

Silvia Pulido, a community outreach worker at the school, commended the City for hosting a healthy-eating and cooking class in Spanish.

"It's great to provide information about nutrition," Pulido said. "The goal is to have healthy families. The City of Perris offers what the community needs. We appreciate all the information they've given us. We say thank you with our attendance."

#### Media Contact

Joe Vargo  
Public Information Officer  
951-943-6100  
[jvargo@cityofperris.org](mailto:jvargo@cityofperris.org)



Perris City Hall  
101 N. D Street  
Perris, CA 92570

Hours: Mon. - Fri. 8 am - 6pm

Phone: (951) 943-6100

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