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Young Gardeners at the May Ranch Elementary School Harvest Festival



May Ranch Elementary School students Taylor Valenzuela, Armando Alfaro and Diego Ugalde inspect plants for sale at the school's Oct. 25 harvest festival.

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The pre-teen gardeners at May Ranch Elementary School in Perris know all about raising fruits, vegetables, spices and herbs—from planting to watering to pest control to cultivation.

They recently learned another lesson: their school garden has commercial value.

Several students became entrepreneurs, selling the pumpkins, spearmint, thyme, basil, rosemary and tomato cuttings grown in the campus garden during the Oct. 25 May Ranch Harvest Festival. A pumpkin cost \$1. So did a tomato cutting. Herbs and spearmint sprigs fetched 50 cents. The goal was to raise \$40, funds that would be pumped back into the May Ranch campus garden program.

May Ranch became one of the first Perris schools to take part in an ongoing community effort to increase healthy food options for City residents. Perris officials are working with schools, non-profits, churches and community organizations to create 30 gardens over the next year or so.

Teacher Kelli Hague said the May Ranch garden, begun several months ago, already is teaching her students life-long lessons.



Taylor Valenzuela, 10, prunes plants for sale at the Oct. 25 May Ranch Elementary School harvest festival.

"I want our students to learn to grow things from the garden to the table," she said. "Our program has been very well accepted throughout the school."

Hague said 10 May Ranch students recently were honored by the City as "Junior Master Gardeners" for completing a course which included the basics of planting, water, cultivating and harvesting fruits, vegetables and other plants. The May Ranch school garden followed, featuring an assortment of herbs, spices and fruits and employs worms to produce fertilizer and vinegar and soap as pesticides rather than spraying with chemicals.

Hague thanked the City of Perris for working with junior green thumbs to spread the word about the importance of growing healthy foods.

"We could not have done anything without the support from the City," she said. "The City cares about its residents tremendously. They are vested in their people, not just in words but in actions. I've never seen a city so invested."

May Ranch students Diego Ugalde, Armando Alfaro and Taylor Valenzuela worked the Harvest Festival, selling produce to peers, parents and visitors who stopped by their booth.



Perris employee Armando Panchi, part of the City's "nutrition education obesity prevention (NEOP) team, explains the importance of consuming healthy drinks instead of high-sugar ones during the May Ranch Elementary School harvest festival.

Diego, 9, a fourth-grader who aspires to be a horticulturalist, said volunteering in the school garden has taught him "how plants work." Plants seemingly defy gravity in the way they get water from their roots to their leaves and flowers. It's done through a process similar to sucking liquid through a straw. Diego has also learned that plants like spearmint can be used as a natural fragrance and to enhance the flavor of water and tea.

Armando, 9, a fourth-grader with plans to become a computer programmer, said he's seen plants grow from seeds to harvest and learned to deal with ant infestations that could kill them. Another insight: "Every plant is unique," he said.

Taylor, 10, a fifth-grader, wants to become an architect who also designs food gardens. She said the garden-project that plants "don't magically grow out of the ground" but result from a lot of hard work like weeding, watering and fertilizing.

She said she's learned a lot from working in the May Ranch garden.

"It's been a lot of fun," she said. "It's relaxing and it's educational."



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