

Canton

Education

Third-graders get a wiggling, squirmy lesson in farming

by Stephanie Riefe

"Who wants to get dirty?" asked farmer Mark Palladino of a group of third-graders.

Every hand went up.

As part of Cherry Brook Primary School's unit on conservation (recycling) and plant and animal adaptation, all third-graders had a visit from Mr. Palladino at their school and then got to visit his farm, located on Route 44.

When Mr. Palladino, known as "Farmer Mark," visited the school, he brought with him enough earthworms for every child to observe and touch. Third-grade teacher Lisa Achee was instrumental, along with Mr. Palladino, in bring the program to life.

"Mark is awesome and a rarity in the world to give of his time and knowledge without a charge or cost to the school. Both the (units) became more meaningful to the third-graders as a result of this field trip," she said.

Understanding how organisms such as earthworms have adapted to living in the soil and how they recycle organic materials, which in turn, provide plants with needed nutrients, help to bring these concepts to life for our students."

At the farm, the students got to rummage around in a compost pile made of wood chips to hunt for worms, as well as see how far they could push their arm into a patch of freshly tilled dirt.

"I can barely see my fingernails," said one boy as he pulled out his arm and took a look.

The junior farmers also did some work. They helped uncover strawberry plants and tomato plants, as well as plant potatoes. But it was the worms that

Students learn what it takes to grow potatoes.

—Photos by Lisa Brisson



seemed to really delight them.

Worm wisdom

The children answered without hesitation and in unison when Mr. Palladino asked them questions about the earthworm: How many hearts does it have? Five. Where does food go after the crop (the worm's compartment area)? The gizzard. When it comes out it's not called poop. What is it called? Castings.

Mr. Palladino runs Wild Carrot Farm on land he leases at Bristol's Farm. He has been working several acres for organic farming for the past three years.

The farm is about 150 acres and the Bristol family farms additional acres not as visible as the acreage that Mr. Palladino works. He has about 10 acres to work with and at the moment about seven are in use.

Vegetables, flowers, herbs and fruits are the stock in trade for this farmer who promotes small and moderate-scale food production using ecological

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practices that minimize the need for synthetic inputs and maximizes stewardship of resources. The farm was certified organic as of June 1 by Baystate Organic Certifiers.

Equally important to him is educating youngsters in knowing where food comes from and how it is grown. In this way, he is trying to foster positive nutritional and environmental attitudes, as well as promoting responsibility and self-esteem.

The school program has two parts: a visit to the school from the farmer and then students visit the farm.

Mr. Palladino has the help of Sarah Strecker at the farm and she was also on hand for their visit. Both Mr. Palladino and Ms. Strecker are master gardeners.

For Ms. Strecker, a town native and a 1981 Canton High School graduate, working at the farm is like coming home. She worked at the farm from the ages of 14-18 and now she's back.

She also works part time at Stop & Shop in Simsbury as a florist, but it is farming that she loves. This year her younger son (she has two boys) will also work at the farm.

Facts about farming

Just after 9 a.m. on this sunny Thursday morning,

Mr. Palladino started the students off by asking them how much of the Earth's land is used for farming? Answers ranged anywhere from two acres to two million acres.

He used an apple to illustrate: first he cut it into four pieces and held three together, representing the water content of the Earth. Then he cut the last quarter in half and said one piece represents the deserts and mountains, where nothing can be grown, but the other piece still did not represent how much of the Earth can be farmed.

He held up the one-eighth and told the students you have to take away a little more because places like Connecticut have winters, when there is no farming. After slicing away again and again, he finally held up little more than the skin of what was left. That depicted how much of the Earth is used for farming.

Then he told the students about organic farming. For example, instead of using harsh pesticides, organic farmers move the crops around and rotate things to keep the bugs guessing.

He also gave students some pointers in identifying plants; a mint plant has a square stem, for instance. Then he showed how tiny plants, with tiny leaves, turn into bigger plants with lettuce leaves ready to pick for a salad.

There are about 135 third graders at Cherry Brook, so the program was divided into two groups.

As the students walked toward the strawberry



Amber Barnstead and Stephanie Day, both nine, show off their prized worms.





Farmer Sarah Strecker helps eight-year-old Peyton Jackson find some worms.



Jacqueline Grabowski, eight, Emma Ciccarillo, nine, and Kaylee Jacques, eight, look for four-leaf clovers in the farm's clover patch.



Farmer Mark encourages Jacqueline Grabowski, eight, to show how a worm farmer gets her hands dirty.

plants to the sound of Mr. Palladino's familiar refrain "OK boys and girls" they were asked if they liked strawberries. "Yes," they answered. How about strawberry shortcake? A groan was elicited from most of the students.

Dean Yost said he liked the farm as he poked his head under the netting near the strawberries.

Peyton Jackson said she liked touching the worms the day before. She described it as "slimy," but she didn't seem to mind.

"It was ticklish," she said.

What did she learn about the earthworm?

"They have five hearts," she said. "They

help plants."

Adults learn, too

It wasn't just the students who were learning. One parent volunteer said she was going to start shopping at Bristol's Farm because it's organic.

After a visit to the blackberry bushes the students got to climb around the compost piles and dig. The wood chips have been rotting for 10 years, said Mr. Palladino of the small piles. The students found baby worms, as well as all sorts of other bugs and some corn cob husks.

Kevin Gurry, Ryan Sanger and Anna Gorbenko held out their hands to show each had a worm wiggling on their palm.

"I found two," said Anna.

Ryan liked that worms have five hearts, something that impressed many of the students (and adults) on the field trip. "I liked that my worm could change his size," said Kevin. "I think it helps him stay in his hole so people don't grab him."

Why do they need to keep wet? Mr. Palladino asked as he reminded the students to put the worms back into the moist soil. Worms breathe through their skin.

"Which side is the head?" asked two girls as they approached Mr. Palladino with a worm. He said it might be hard to tell since it's so young, but normally the band where they lay their eggs is closer to the head.

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The farm seems to be a lot of fun for the adults, as well as younger folks, as Mr. Palladino pointed out rock piles that marked rows of plantings and these "rock people," as he called them, have names. There is a Kid Rock and a Rocky Raccoon and he is open to suggestions as long as the word rock or stone is in the name. Someone suggested the Rolling Stones to him the day before. He's thinking about it.

Five-leaf clovers?

The children then were asked to search through a clover patch and look for four-leaf clovers as well as five-leaf clovers. Several four-leaf clovers were found and at least one five-leaf variety. With the recent rain, it was easy to get patches of dirt on one's knees, pant bottoms or pant cuffs, but no one seemed to mind. Mr. Palladino worked the John Deere spade for the students. After that, they had chance to see how far they could stick their arm into the loose,

cool, moist soil. They were also told about the transplanter, which digs a hole, fills it with water and then a plant is stuck in, all with the help of a few people sitting on the back end of the contraption.

Ms. Strecker said she loves to drive the tractors, especially the John Deere, and is amazed at what the transplanter can do compared to how it was done when she worked there as a teenager.

Walking past rows of garlic plants, the students' next task was to help plant the potatoes.

Billy Cote said it was fun planting the potatoes. What did he learn?

"I don't really know," he said with a smile.

But it was fun. Bristol's Farm is located at 541 Albany Turnpike. The sales room hours are Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. through October 1.

Starting October 2, hours are Thursday and Friday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For more information call 693-8965 or visit www.wildcarrotfarm.com. **CL**

What's available

Want something fresh? The farm has organic vegetable seeds, vegetable transplants, all kinds of just-harvested vegetables, flowers, fruits and herbs for sale.

In addition there are onions, garlic, potatoes, salad greens, lettuce heads, arugula, scallions and more seasonal produce.

Fresh-baked pies and cookies, honey, maple syrup, eggs, jams, teas, herbal soaps, organic compost and organic potting soils are also available.

The earthworm

There are 4,400 species of worms — 2,700 different kinds of earthworms, to be exact. An earthworm has five hearts. Earthworms have mouths and they can open them wide to fit leaves and other things. But they don't have teeth.