

Profile from the Field

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Indiana School Raises Apples & Awareness

Project Title: Watching Food Grow: a Small Organic Apple Orchard at a Rural Elementary School

Coordinator: Perry Kirkham and Mike Pinto

Location: Lafayette, IN

SARE Grant: \$1,934

Duration: 2014-2015

To read the full project report, go to <http://mysare.sare.org> and search for project number YENC14-076.



James A. Cole Elementary students learn about sustainable apple production and marketing through their SARE-supported school apple orchard (above and below). All photos by Sue Scott.

Forty-two percent of school districts surveyed by the USDA say they participate in farm-to-school activities, according to the 2015 Farm-to-School Census. That means as many as 23.6 million students are learning

where their food comes from. Another 16 percent of school districts surveyed plan to start farm-to-school activities in the future. Farm-to-school activities can include having farmers visit the cafeteria, classroom, or other school-related settings; hosting farm-to-school related community events, and/or celebrating National Farm-to-School Month each October.

A few years ago, a small farm-to-school apple tasting took place at James A. Cole Elementary in Lafayette, Indiana in conjunction with Wea Creek Orchard. Later that day, Cole students took more apples off the lunch lines than ever before. Cole Principal, Mike Pinto, saw an opportunity and contacted Perry Kirkham, Wea Creek orchardist and program coordinator for research development at Purdue University, to explore opportunities to expand the program.

Pinto and Kirkham applied for and received a \$1,934 NCR-SARE Youth Educator grant in 2014 to start a small organic apple orchard at the rural elementary school. The project would allow Cole students from kindergarten through 5th grade to participate in tree care and growth, fruit production, and food preparation.

“I’m very interested in teaching kids how to grow food,” explained Kirkham. “We thought this was a good way to teach students how to grow their own food, even if it’s just on a very small plot of land.”

They planted 12 disease resistant apple trees on school grounds (2 trees per grade level) to involve the

students in the actual production as much as possible. The younger grades helped plant the trees, took measurements of tree growth, and tracked physical changes like leaf and branch emergence. Older grades helped prune, learned to induce branching, and learned specifics about production such as measuring apple characteristics (taste, crispness, size). About 250 students were involved during the first year of the project. Today, the orchard is part of the grade level curriculum. Pinto and Kirkham reported that the most popular activity (as judged by student enthusiasm) was gauging how apples tasted. Students bite into apples to see how sweet they are, then compare the results to the sugar content and texture as judged objectively using a refractometer or a penetrometer, respectively.

“The most impressive result of the project is simply ‘awareness,’” explained Pinto. “So many times, even in our rural setting, kids do not have a concept of where their food comes from. This awareness was cultivated by seeing the apple trees planted and then also speaking about the results.”

Pinto also explained how consumerism was fostered through the project, as students (and adults) were able to differentiate types of apples.

“So frequently, the four or five apple varieties available in the grocery store is the extent of the consumer palette,” said Pinto. “This grant fostered a greater depth and breadth of student and adult understanding.”

In association with the project, Cole has started a staff wellness initiative. In conjunction with Wea Creek Orchard, Cole provides staff members with a different variety of apple to sample each week. The sample includes information about its uses, texture, and sometimes-interesting facts.

“The idea is again to grow the palette of the adults,” said Pinto. “For example, an old variety of apple called Russet Beauty was shared. It is not the prettiest apple — actually it’s kind of ugly. It has the texture of a pear and kind of a similar taste. But many staff members enjoyed it and said they will try to buy it when offered. This is an interesting offshoot that is both healthy and also informative, and adds to the consumerism of our staff.”



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