

A pizza garden grows in Immokalee

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

Youngsters at Guadalupe Center in Immokalee are helping to care for a pizza garden as a slice of the 900-square-foot, raised-bed garden that was recently created in their schoolyard. Building the garden and installing a picket fence to surround it was a labor of love, with volunteers preparing the ground, installing wood-framed planting beds, filling them with top soil and working side-by-side with the school's children to do the planting.

"An edible schoolyard garden allows us to introduce our young students to the core principles of life science in a very tangible way," said Barbara Oppenheim, Guadalupe Center executive director.

Life science instruction has been lacking in Immokalee, with 71.3 percent of elementary children there who have been tested in science falling below state standards, according to the Florida Department of Education website. Ms. Oppenheim believes the garden can help change that for Guadalupe Center children.

"We have a lot of space dedicated to the arts and technology, but we were lacking a science element. With the garden, we will be teaching about worms, photosynthesis, how flowers produce seeds, the environment, ecology and more," she says.

To create the pizza garden, volunteers and students planted oregano, tomatoes and basil in a designated area. They also put in some flowers and planted beds with summer-hardy plants that will bear okra, tropical pumpkins, eggplants and sweet potatoes. And given Immokalee's rich heritage as an agricultural town, they planted crops that many of the children's parents will be harvesting in the town's

fields: avocados, bell peppers, jalapenos and citrus trees.

"We're using these crops as 'teachable moments,'" says Bryan Lee, development manager for the center. "We're helping students understand at an early age how plants provide income and food for people."

Math also fits into the garden equation. "One part of the garden is built into geometric shapes," Mr. Lee says. "We also reinforce math lessons by having the children plant five seeds in a line and so forth. We like to call it 'stealth' learning."

The garden project began as a collaboration between Guadalupe Center and the Naples Children & Education Foundation, which founded the Naples Winter Wine Festival. NCEF put the school together with employees from Goldman Sachs' Community TeamWorks in Miami; Guadalupe Center secured a donor to match Goldman's financial contribution.

A team of volunteers, armed them with garden plans, raw materials and plenty of water, removed existing grass, erected a



Estrella helps with the planting.



Anthony assists with digging duties.



Alejandro and Ruben set the stage for gardening activity.

MILA BRIDGER / COURTESY PHOTOS

fence, hammered wooden beds into desired shapes and carted bags of top soil to fill the beds in preparation for planting with the children.

John Puig, head gardener at the nonprofit Eden Florida, provided hours and hours of gardening expertise in preparation for the big day of planting.

Ms. Oppenheim says 250 children from 6 months old to kindergarten age are enrolled in Guadalupe Center's Early Learning Program, and all but the youngest dozen toddlers will benefit from having the edible classroom. "We hope to continue planting seasonally so that when crops are harvested in Immokalee, the children will be doing the same in our little garden," she says.

The center seeks to address several community issues with a variety of programs that touch the lives of the most impoverished children in Immokalee. Its mission is to break the cycle of poverty by providing educational, social and other support programs and resources to those in need. For more information, call 657-7711 or visit www.guadalupe-center.org. ■