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# FARM-TO-SCHOOL

## ONE FISH, TWO FISH...

### Growing lunch with aquaponics

BY MELISSA WALDRON LEHNER

Class was about to begin at the Donald F. Harris Sr. Agri-Science & Technology Center at Bloomfield High School. Joe Rodrigues, the environmental science teacher—not one to suffer fools lightly—stood in the front hall, eyeing each student as they burst through the door. A latecomer sauntered in and Joe nabbed him. “Yo! I want to talk to you.” The kid tried to show Joe the Red Cross bandage he received after giving blood—an excuse, he thought to get out of class. Joe was having none of it. “In this class today, you’re going to keep your butt in your chair. No fooling around.” The kid faked a shocked



look. “But Mr. Rodrigues, I just gave blood, doesn’t that get me off the hook?” Joe smirked, “Of course not.” Tough love.

Lanky and well dressed, replete with spotless, well-shined shoes and a signature bow tie, Joe has a take-no-prisoners attitude that his students seem to respect. With almost 100 pupils taking courses at the center, he doesn’t have a lot of time for fooling around. Joe and his colleagues at the Agri-Science Center work with freshmen to seniors, not only from Bloomfield but also from Windsor, East Granby, and Hartford. Harris is one of 19 agricultural education centers in Connecticut where students come to learn how to grow food.

“Kale, tomatoes, basil, herbs, lettuce, peppers, shallots,” Joe says as he shows me around the freshly planted garden out back. “We grow it all here.” His infectious enthusiasm for this program spreads to the kids—but don’t tell them that. If you visit their on-site greenhouse in late winter, you will find the students planting seedlings in tiny pots, and some will gripe about the workload. Teenagers are fickle by nature, eager to plant one minute, quickly bored the next. “Come on!” Joe will chide them. “We haven’t got all day,” he says to one student playing with her iPod. But even with their can’t-be-bothered posing, the kids will tell you how cool they think the program is. One teenager told an NBC30 interviewer: “It’s actually exciting, you know, to see something you grew in first period that’s eaten in third period for lunch.”

The students are secretly proud of the fact that in a month’s time, seedlings they planted in January end up as lovely arugula plants which are then harvested by the culinary arts students, who also learn, in a class taught by Chef Paul Waszkelewicz, how to cook with the slightly spicy salad green and other greenhouse specialties. More of the produce ends up in the cafeteria kitchen, prepared by the staff for all the high school students. The basil they grow becomes topping on pizzas; the habanero peppers are turned into a sauce for the pork sandwiches.

Jaunice Edwards, who joined the program at its inception in 1997, when all the agriculture education was taught in one room, is now the director of the Agri-Science Center. She is in charge of their hydroponic, floral design, and aquaculture programs while Mary LeBlond, the animal science teacher, handles the lop-eared rabbits and free-range chickens. Starting in the fall they will have up to 30 layers, mostly Rhode Island Reds and Barred Rocks, and will be selling eggs to the public.

In the early years they had trouble just giving away the food they grew. “We weren’t really doing much with all this food we were producing,” Jaunice admitted, telling me that at one point they even discontinued their aquaponics program. It’s just in the past couple of years that the Center has extended training to practical application thanks to the arrival of the Local Food Dude, or rather, Timothy Cipriano. Coming on board in 2005 as food service director, Tim oversees six schools (K–12) with a total of 2,400 kids, who get served a whopping 1,800 meals per day in six cafeterias with two full-service kitchens. What seems overwhelming to a home cook is routine for a food service professional. However, instead of sourcing entirely from one or two distributors, Tim orchestrates many players to improve the quality of food on students’ plates. He has created the much admired Bloomfield Schools Farm-to-School Program [BSF2S], sourcing local foods for cafeteria meals and decreasing the time-tested use of a can opener and three-quart cans of industrial tomato sauce. This

ongoing collaboration between the Agri-Science, Culinary Arts, and Foodservice departments has become known in the culinary-school world as a cutting-edge education program and is now hotly sought after by students. Many who graduate have gone on to culinary schools, or now work for local food projects like the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station and the Hartford Food System. And far fewer students bring their own lunches.

Out of all the agricultural initiatives, the resuscitated aquaponics program is the most avant-garde, and has thrived with Tim's support. Aquaponics is the combination of aquaculture and hydroponics, or simply stated, a place where you grow plants and fish together in one big tank. It is considered to be a very sustainable form of farming since the fish waste, formerly discarded, now provides a food source for the growing plants while the plants provide a natural water filter for the fish.

Jaunice took me on a tour of the aquaponics room, which is part of the greenhouse facilities. There are three 250-gallon tanks plus one that holds 700 gallons. The big fat tank has lettuces and tomatoes growing on top, the smaller ones have 45-50 basil plants floating on top in Styrofoam beds, each tucked into a hole that allows the roots to feed on the fish waste. "The plants grow really well in water," says Jaunice. "In fact, they grow twice as fast as they do in soil. Growing them in soil actually takes a lot more work."

And underneath the greenery are schools of tilapia and catfish swimming about. One 250-gallon tank can hold 100 pounds of fish while the 700-gallon tank can hold 500 pounds. That's a lot of fish, enough to feed armies of students. Last semester was a test run, but Jaunice feels that by the fall, the cafeteria menu will be featuring pan-fried catfish and tilapia quite often. The few fish they had this spring ended up in a fish fry at the school's first farmers' market last May. Cheneil Carnegie, a junior who is on her way to chef stardom, was one of the students cooking the fish that day. "My dad was a chef so it's in the family. And from here I plan on going to Johnson and Wales to become a chef too." She stopped and thought about it for a second. "An executive chef, that is." Squirting more lemon onto the fish in the pan she looked at me and beamed. 🍋

## RESOURCES

Bloomfield Schools Farm-to-School Program  
[www.blmfld.org/farmtoschool](http://www.blmfld.org/farmtoschool)

Donald F. Harris Sr. Agri-Science and Technology Center  
[www.blmfld.org/agriscience](http://www.blmfld.org/agriscience)

Local Food Dude  
[www.localfooddude.com](http://www.localfooddude.com)

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service  
[www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/aquaponic.html](http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/aquaponic.html)

Connecticut Sea Grant  
[www.seagrants.uconn.edu/aquaguide/](http://www.seagrants.uconn.edu/aquaguide/)



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