

Foothills Gazette

Program brings fresh, local food to student classrooms

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Junior High School student Jake Cooper (left) and senior high school student James D. Ortiz (right) are preparing mashed potatoes using locally grown yellow and purple potatoes. “This is my favorite class,” Cooper said. PHOTO BY BRITA ADKINSON

Produce, dairy products used in cooking and catering classrooms

by Brita Adkinson

EVERSON – An initiative to supply local farm produce to schools has brought fresh fruit and vegetables into the cooking and catering classrooms of Nooksack Valley High School (NVHS).

“I discussed the idea with Cheryl Thornton at Cloud Mountain Farm and Gretchen Hoyt at Alm Hill Gardens,” explained Lois Rienstra, Family Consumer Science Teacher at NVHS.

Some parents talked to staff at NVHS, asking if the school would consider buying locally grown produce for use in their cooking classes. Produce comes from a number of farms, including Growing Washington, an established non-profit farming organization in the Everson area that works with a network of local farms.

Rienstra also attended some meetings where she met with local farmers and explored possibilities to work with them. As a result, the high school began using food from local farms this fall.

Peggy Davis, director of Food Service at the Nooksack Valley School District explained that the project is currently at an exploratory stage, with the potential to expand in the future.

Freshly harvested vegetables and fruit from local farms are now delivered to the school each week, and the produce is used in five catering and cooking classes. The project is inspired by a nation-wide initiative called “F to S” – Farm to School.

In the beginning, some students were not familiar with the different types of vegetables that arrived. “Some students said, ‘I’m not going to eat that!’ Rienstra commented with a smile, adding, “But now, cauliflower, chard and carrot dishes just disappear!”



Senior student Kent Badgero, of Everson, enjoys preparing a dish using locally grown carrots. PHOTO BY BRITA ADKINSON

Students are becoming familiar with a large variety of local farm produce and know their uses. “When we began with the new program, I re-organized my schedule,” Rienstra said. “Before, I would begin the fall term with baking, but now we begin with fruit and vegetable dishes. We will work with baking in the winter, instead,” she concluded.

Students are learning about the harvesting times for different types of produce as the school receives what is in season, week by week.

“We also buy cheeses from several local cheese makers, and we get dairy products from local dairy farms,” Rienstra said, adding she is glad that the school can support local businesses in this way.

Rienstra, who lives near Lynden and received her teaching qualification at Western Washington University, has taught at NVHS for eight years. “It is my hope that our classes will help students develop a healthy lifestyle,” she said.

The school's food service program, which now incorporates local produce in catering classes and to some extent also in school lunches, is regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture through a regional office and supervised by the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). Thus, development of policy is subject to long term monitoring and evaluation.

Through Growing Washington, the Growing Whatcom CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) – inspired by the old market system at Pike Place Market in Seattle – provides locally grown items. Jay Dennison, of Growing Washington, said the organization pays attention to customers' individual preferences. "We know that the Nooksack Valley High School needs eggs, butter and milk every week, so we always supply those items," Dennison explained, adding the school receives what is in season. "Right now they are getting winter squash, kale, swiss chard and grain."



Lois Rienstra (far left), Family Consumer Science Teacher at Nooksack Valley High School talks with senior student Briceyda Samano, Everson, who is baking a pie. PHOTO BY BRITA ADKINSON

Growing Whatcom CSA farms are mostly located in the Everson, Ferndale and Lynden areas, and include: Bellewood Acres, Broadleaf Farm, Common Threads Farm, DEVine Gardens, Double Rainbow Farm, F.A, Farm, Hauk's Orchard, Hopewell Organic Farm, K&M Red River Farm, Nooksack Nine Fruits and Veggies, Rabbit Fields Farm, Red Mountain Farm, Cooperative Jacal and Wake Robin Farm.

Western Washington University (WWU) recently invited Growing Washington to start a pilot project supplying fresh local produce on a weekly basis to individual students and also to caterers at the WWU.

"This is a fledgling program that began with some discussions among farmers, parents and teachers, about bringing local produce to schools," explained Gretchen Hoyt, of Alm Hill Gardens in Everson. Hoyt shared that she helped organize a sampling event at NVHS with apples donated by Cloud Mountain Farm, also of Everson. "It was a lot of fun," she said.

Hoyt noted the Farm to School project at NVHS received financial assistance from Whatcom Community Foundation, to help get it off the ground.

Washington State's Farm to School projects work with a number of schools in northwest counties.