

EXPLAINING

Gardens, Gardens Everywhere!

By David Whitman, Fairchild Challenge Manager

Little compares to the harmony-inducing and soul-healing effects of gardening, and Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden is doing all it can to involve South Florida's youth in gardening as a life skill.



Students pose proudly in their Fairchild Challenge school garden at Dr. Michael M. Krop Senior High.

Forty schools competing in the annual school gardening and habitat restoration option of this year's Fairchild Challenge were awarded up to \$200 each—\$6,100 collectively—by Fairchild last month for their projects, in addition to an innovative YourOutDoors tool kit designed for young gardeners.

Representing 130 South Florida secondary schools (plus ten elementary schools in a pilot program), tens of thousands of students are actively involved in this year's multidisciplinary Fairchild Challenge competitions, and school gardening is one of the most popular options.

School gardens reflect the immense creativity, diversity and exuberance of students who are active in the Fairchild Challenge. They also encourage teamwork, where friendships and mutual respect naturally grow in tandem with the gardens. And many students who struggle in traditional classroom settings find that they excel in gardening and habitat restoration projects, increasing their knowledge, self-confidence, academic performance and appreciation of nature.

Children today expect instant results and constant excitement. The school garden gives them a place of peace, a place to learn patience, a place to work and watch things grow. It is a place where things take time. It is a place to build self-esteem and wisdom.

*Michelle Dreseris, Ruth Owens Kruse
Educational Center*

responsibility for beautifying their environment," added Chormanski. Fairchild's community outreach coordinator, Alison Walker, teamed up with Chormanski and colleague April Dominguez to conduct two free, daylong gardening workshops

"School gardens also provide opportunities to learn horticultural skills, observe nature, discover plant lifecycles and identify where our food comes from," notes Fairchild's education outreach coordinator Theresa Chormanski.

"Teachers use gardens as spring-boards to introduce science, language and visual arts, social studies, math and many other disciplines. School gardens let students take ownership in their school and


responsibility for beautifying their environment," added Chormanski. Fairchild's community outreach coordinator, Alison Walker, teamed up with Chormanski and colleague April Dominguez to conduct two free, daylong gardening workshops

annually for teachers. During the Saturday workshops, teachers learned from Fairchild's conservation ecologist Dr. Joyce Maschinski how to restore schoolyards to pine rockland habitats. Maschinski and seed technician Don Walters trained participants to establish and care for pine rockland species, and provided each with a starter kit of native plants for their schools.

The Fairchild Challenge supports school gardening and habitat restoration at schools in other ways, too. Last year it offered each participating school a mango or jackfruit sapling. Teachers have received various resource books: Georgia Tasker's *Enchanted Ground: Gardening with Nature in the Subtropics*, David Fairchild's *The World Was My Garden*, *Travels of a Plant Explorer* and William Whitman's *Five Decades with Tropical Fruit, A Personal Journey*.

The Fairchild Challenge works with nurseries to provide seeds and plants and coordinates volunteers with gardening expertise (notable among them Don Evans, Fairchild's retired director of grounds management, and Margie Bauer of the U.S. Department of Agriculture) to advise schools on their gardens.

In the past, the students have created a dizzying array of gardens, including native, butterfly, vegetable, pond ecosystem, hummingbird, greenhouse, edible, memorial, tranquility, arid, pine rockland, carnivorous, orchid, Egyptian, color, moveable, salsa, art, aquatic, Shakespeare and, yes, pizza gardens!

In mid-April, Fairchild Challenge representatives will visit an estimated 75 schools throughout the region to see, smell, taste and fully appreciate the gardens the students have created. Then, on April 22, gardening experts and enthusiasts will evaluate the projects based on reports and photographs submitted by the competing schools. 

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Final results of the Fairchild Challenge 2008 competitions will be announced at awards ceremonies on Friday, May 9 (grades 9-12), Saturday, May 10 (grades 6-8), and Tuesday, May 13 (grades K-5). Schools that excel in the program receive the Fairchild Challenge Award, with cash prizes for environmental activities being awarded to the top-scoring schools. Additionally, the school-nominated Fairchild Challenge 2008 Environmental Role Models, or "Emies," will be honored. Please join us for these celebrations!