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East Ridge High School wins green for being green

East Ridge High School has been named the winner of the Fairchild Challenge @ Cherry Lake Tree Farm, a program for high school students that seeks to merge environmental awareness with interdisciplinary skills such as creative writing, photography, research, science and commercial technology.

Cherry Lake Tree Farm has been offering this program to Lake County high schools for 3 years now. The program was founded in Miami at the Fairchild Botanical Gardens, and in 2007 the local, family owned business in Groveland was trained to be a host-site for the program. "It is such an amazing program and has been overwhelmingly successful in the Miami-Dade area. We jumped at the opportunity to bring this program to our local schools," says Chloe Gentry, coordinator of the Fairchild Challenge at Cherry Lake Tree Farm. "It made sense for us to host - we are a large private businesses with resources, and we are passionate about trees and what they can do for the environment - we want to make sure that our future generation is aware of the challenges and opportunities in the environment, and maybe even get them to explore environmental sciences in college or in their careers."

In its pilot year, the Fairchild Challenge had 80 students participate. The participation rate jumped to 400 students in 2010, and this year they had over 700 students participate from five Lake County Schools. The teachers involved have welcomed the challenge and appreciate having intriguing and current topics that fit well inside their curriculums. "I'm proud of my kids--of the work they did. It provided an opportunity for the students to express themselves, but I also learned so much from reading their work and hearing their perspectives," says Ellen Parker, AP Writing and Composition Teacher at East Ridge High School.

The Fairchild Challenge not only seeks to engage students in environmental awareness, but also hopes to develop their critical thinking skills by combining different disciplinary skills within each option. This came to fruition for Ellen Parker who had her AP Writing and Composition students work on the Bio-Fuel Research Paper option of the Fairchild Challenge. "One of the Science AP exams that some of my students took at the end of the year required biodiesel knowledge," says Ellen. "Those kids came to me saying how well prepared they were for that essay! So, the contest paid off in more ways than expected."