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'Challenge' prompts high-schoolers to get down to Earth

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Some will model outfits fashioned entirely from plants. Others will try their hand at cultivating an ornamental garden, and others still will craft a newsletter detailing the benefits of recycling.

When Lake County high-school students take part in the Fairchild Challenge at Cherry Lake Tree Farm, the program will test their gardening abilities, challenge their horticulture interests and expand their environmental literacy.

Organizers hope the world of agriculture and horticulture will open up to the teens.

The Fairchild Challenge is in its start-up stage in Lake County, but more than 100 schools in Miami-Dade County and across the country take part in the program. It started at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables as a way to introduce teens to environmental topics that wouldn't normally be on their radar screens.

Top executives at Cherry Lake Tree Farm in Groveland heard about the program and wanted to start it here. After that, all the pieces fell into place. Lake is only the second county in Florida to implement the program.

The first step is getting teachers and students committed.

"It connects young people to our industry," said Michel Sallin, the tree farm's president and chief executive officer. "As a business, it's very important for us to attract young people. It's much more than digging a hole and putting a tree in the hole."

According to the company's Web site, the tree farm provides "customized tree solutions for projects where landscaping is considered a key element."

The Fairchild Challenge program began in 2002 and has expanded to involve more than 40,000 students in cities such as Washington and Chicago. It's based on the public-school curriculum and "allows students to explore the world of arts, fashion, science, horticulture, language arts and education," according to information provided by Cherry Lake.

For the tree farm, a crucial piece in getting the program running was connecting with Jackie Metcalf, an East Ridge High School Earth-science teacher.

Metcalf worked for six months as a program assistant for the Fairchild Challenge at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. She later became a science teacher and moved to Lake County. This summer she applied for a Cherry Lake internship. Officials there were thrilled to discover her background with the challenge. Now she is a "go-to" person for information about implementing the program.

Teachers from seven high schools, including Mount Dora, Umatilla, Eustis and Leesburg, already have expressed interest in getting involved, said Cherry Lake's director of marketing, Timothy Sallin. In coming weeks, those teachers will be recruiting students.

Under the program, participating schools are awarded points in each of the four challenges, which are designed to provoke thought and encourage teamwork.

One challenge has students designing a plant-based outfit -- one with all visible parts made entirely from plants. It will be worn during a March fashion show at the tree farm.

Another challenge will be establishing or maintaining a themed garden at school and creating a booklet summarizing the efforts.

The winning school earns \$1,000 for environmental programs.

But, really, everyone wins, Timothy Sallin said. Students get advanced knowledge of environmental issues, Cherry Lake cultivates a future work force and winning schools get much-needed funds to put toward environmental programs.

"We are committed to Fairchild Challenge because we want to develop a work force that is interested in agriculture and horticulture careers," he said. "We want to be involved with beautification and education efforts."

More information: [cherrylake.com/ Challenge](http://cherrylake.com/Challenge) or 352-429-2171.

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