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'Plant It Forward' program shares fresh produce with friendship school

Submitted by Cathy Chang



Photo provided

"Plant It Forward" is a new hands-on service project that matches those with the space and desire to grow food with families who need it. How it works: Camino Pablo Elementary School families were given free, edible plant seedlings to grow nutritious plants for their own use during summer break. In return, the families agreed to give back surplus from those crops to communities in need.

The pilot program was organized by the Camino Pablo Elementary PTA Community Services Committee. Some seedlings were donated by the local volunteer-run farm, and the rest were from community members' private greenhouses in Moraga.

All told, students and families adopted about 60 edible plants before the 2020-21 school year, and grew food at home during the summer break. Each family was then called on to give back a pint-sized container (or more, if they wished) of fresh produce from their gardens in September when school started again. The produce was dropped off and collected on campus, and was then shared with community friendship school, Meadow Homes Elementary School in Concord.

Over 650 students at Meadow Homes Elementary receive free or reduced-price lunch daily, and the Camino Pablo Elementary PTA has been donating washed gently used clothes and shoes since 2018.

"I don't eat a lot of tomatoes, but I want to grow tomatoes for the families at Meadow Homes," said seventh-grade student, Brian Harrison. "We adopted eggplants, but as it turned out our eggplants didn't grow very well. But we had a lot of herbs and kale in our garden to give back, and we were so excited to share! We love 'Plant it Forward,'" said Leslie Nuccio, whose daughter Abby Nuccio is in fifth grade. "It's a really fun way to engage the kids in volunteer work, and it's also a great way to encourage people who haven't taken the leap yet to grow food at home - but do have the space and sunshine - to go ahead and give it a try."

Beyond the fresh produce from "Plant It Forward," the local farm also donated over-ripen tomatoes after their summer harvest to be processed into jarred tomato sauce for Meadow Homes families. This, too, was a fun community affair: three fifth-grade students from Camino Pablo Elementary volunteered to help jar the sauce and make labels for all the jars and produce for the delivery. "We're delivering what's good from our gardens to their families because we care, so every label has to look nice!" said the fifth-graders.

In the end, the pilot year of "Plant It Forward" was a great success. Beyond the vegetables, the program sent friendship and warmth from one community to another. Coordinators would love to see this program expand to other Lamorinda schools. So dear readers, what would you plant this next season to share

For questions about "Plant it Forward" or to run the program at your own school, please contact hwchang3@gmail.com at the Camino Pablo Elementary School PTA Community Services Committee.

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