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PEOPLE'S GARDEN TAKES ROOT AT DOWNSVILLE CENTRAL SCHOOL by Glenn Graves

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DOWNSVILLE — Last year, Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) of Delaware County applied to participate in the People's Garden research project, which is a national project being initiated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The project aims to engage elementary students in New York, Washington, Iowa and Arkansas by having them create vegetable and fruit gardens as part of a two-year study.

The project is being headed by Washington State University and Cornell University and involves second, fourth and fifth graders and will follow them as they move into the third, fifth and sixth grades. The project will examine what effects raising their own gardens will have on their consumption of fruits and vegetables.

New York state has 17 low-income schools participating in the study, with at least two

from Schenectady, Monroe, Suffolk, Wayne and Delaware counties. Delaware County has three schools involved, Downsville, Deposit and Margaretville. Downsville and Deposit are planting gardens this spring as part of the "intervention" group and Margaretville will get its gardens next spring, as part of the "waitlist" control group. The three schools were chosen because they didn't already have school gardens.

This past Monday, CCE of Delaware County Executive Director Jeanne Darling and three research assistants, Sarah Dinger, Jen Mackall and Alex Gensemer, all students studying at Cornell University, met with students at Downsville Central School and helped each of the three grades plant a garden. Darling said she had done some "preliminary baseline" work at Downsville last fall. The work involved

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ABOVE PHOTO: Joan Tubridy's fifth-grade class proudly displays the sign that tells everyone they have planted a raised bed People's Garden at Downsville Central School. Joining the students for the planting and the photo were Cornell Cooperative Extension of Delaware County Executive Director Jeanne Darling and Cornell University students, Sarah Dinger, Jen Mackall and Alex Gensemer.



“We also wanted to find out what kind of foods they like to eat,” said Jeanne Darling, Executive Director, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Delaware County.

Sarah Dinger, at left, a Cornell University student assisting with the People’s Garden project, helps fifth graders Emily Brown and Max Kaufman plant broccoli on Monday in Downsview’s People’s Garden.

checking on the quantity of vegetables and fruits in the diets of the youngsters and introducing nutritional information into the curriculum. “We also wanted to find out what kind of foods they like to eat,” Darling said.

At the time of the baseline work, each child’s lunch tray was measured and photographed to record the consumption. This past Monday, the trays were again measured and photographed for the study. The measurements will be repeated again this coming fall and next spring. Dinger said that in the four-state study area, 18,000 photos will be taken before the study is completed.

But the most fun for the students participating in the project was planting their gardens. On Monday, they filled four raised beds with broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and garlic transplants and seeds for winter squash,

cucumbers, bean, beets, carrots and lettuce.

Although there was a light rain falling through most of the day, the children didn’t seem to be bothered, as they poked holes in the soil for seeds, dug small holes for organic fertilizer and the transplants and watered their filled beds. Each classroom involved in the project planted its own bed and will be responsible for its care, until summer break, when the responsibility will be shared by the students participating in the many activities at the school and, likely, some of the year-round employees.

Darling said the project’s goals are not only to encourage more vegetable and fruit consumption in low-income populations but to encourage them to consider and contribute toward a sustainable environment and food system by becoming gardeners. Another goal is

to create a network of Extension educators across the country who can develop a feasible national program for involving young people in healthful and educational activities.

“I’m interested in how New York compares to the other states in the study,” Darling said. “Obesity is a huge issue in this country. It will be interesting to see if we have significant differences.”

Some of the food the students are growing will be used in the school’s cafeteria. Some will be donated to the community’s food bank.

In New York state, the project also involves measuring students’ activity. While in school and during recess, students are wearing accelerometers, which sense students’ movements and differentiate when the students are outside in the sunshine or in their classrooms. ☞