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## Elementary students grow their own lunch

With the help of local farmers and businesses, Perry Elementary has a bountiful garden supplying it with fresh produce.

**By JOY LEIKER**

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SELMA -- If you teach students to garden, will they feed themselves?

At Perry Elementary last Tuesday, the answer was yes.

Students took turns in the school's garden in the morning, walking through the rows of corn and each picking an ear. Then they tugged at the husks, pulled the silky pieces from the yellow kernels and dropped each ear into a red basket.

An hour later, students were feasting on fresh corn, along with grilled hot dogs, chips, cookies, and a mix of raw vegetables and dip, including cherry tomatoes from the garden.

"We wanted to provide (the students) with an experience. If you see it in a book, it's not the same," said Assistant Principal Bonnie Coffman. "We have all this ground out here that's just been sitting idle."

But the grass is no longer idle outside this school. Two years ago teachers and food service director Brenda Layne decided to plant a garden. Teachers, including Coffman, a kindergarten teacher at the time, used it to show students how plants and food grew. Layne said fresh vegetable crops could be used in the Liberty-Perry Community Schools kitchens.

Farmers and ag businesses donated supplies and now there are rows of corn, tomatoes, green peas, pumpkins and several varieties of peppers growing. Some of those farmers -- many of them husbands of school staffers -- helped students husk the corn and later enjoyed lunch with them outside at picnic tables.

"It's just using the resources we have," Coffman said, noting that some of the corn was ready to pick before students returned to school Aug. 14. So staff picked it and sold it. The \$70 earned will help buy supplies or seeds for the future.

And this garden isn't just a one-time thing. It's also not just happening at Perry Elementary, a school of about 135 kindergarten and first-graders. This summer Wapahani High School ordered a greenhouse, and biology students will nurture plants inside it. They could also provide starter plants for the garden at Perry.

Layne would love to serve more fresh fruits and vegetables at lunch, and already the high school salad bar is a bevy of school-grown produce.

But then again maybe there's a reason elementary schools don't often serve corn on the cob. As students from Perry Elementary showed Tuesday, it's a little tough biting down on the cob when you're missing teeth.

Camron Nowaczyk did his best, despite his missing two front teeth and another one that's loose.

"At first it was a long piece (of corn,) but now it's not," said Camron, who knew that the ear he picked was much larger than the one he had for lunch. (Most of them had been split in half.)

For school officials, there's yet another benefit to the garden project.

"It's kind of cool we had a field trip without getting on a bus," Coffman said.

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