**Sustainable Farming in Tampa’s Backyard**

Sweetwater Organic Community Farm was established in 1995 as a nonprofit, certified organic vegetable farm and education center founded by Rick Martinez. The urban farm grows produce on 6 acres of residential land. Sweetwater Organic Farm promotes sustainability, farming without chemicals, and strives to build community in Tampa. On Sundays, a Farmer’s Market is hosted that offers community members the opportunity to check out the farm, listen to great music, have a picnic lunch, shop for local produce and environmentally-friendly products, meet like-minded individuals, and enjoy Sweetwater Farm’s orchard and gardens. On Sunday mornings, yoga classes in the Kundalini tradition and Vinyasa style are held.

**The “Food, Field Trips, and Sweetwater Organic Farm” Workshop**

Dr. Jane Applegate hosted the “Food, Field Trips, and Sweetwater Organic Farm” workshop as an outstanding member of the College of Education and Sweetwater’s Board of Directors. Caroline Garber, Sweetwater’s Education Program Manager, coordinates and leads the farm’s field trips, builds and develops the education program, and maintains the education gardens. These inspiring and down-to-Earth women led discussions on the teacher’s role for field trips, experiential learning opportunities, and what Sweetwater Organic Farms offers.

**The Teacher’s Role for Field Trips**

Dr. Jane Applegate led a discussion regarding the educator’s role prior to, throughout, and after field trips. Before taking students on an out-of-the-classroom learning experience, an effective educator is knowledgeable about the location of the trip and front-loads learning for students by building on prior knowledge so students can apply their learning in an authentic context. The educator should also ensure that students are aware of appropriate behaviors and maintain corresponding behavior management throughout the duration of the field trip. During experiential learning, the teacher should keep students engaged, focused, and involved through guiding questions and modeling participation. An innovative idea was shared that promoted recording video clips or taking photographs of students during their learning experience to share with parents, the school, and to be used in later lessons. After field trips, it is especially important for students to have the opportunity to reflect on their learning and build upon new understandings by applying their experience in subsequent lessons or extension activities. From her own familiarity with hosting students, Caroline Garber remarked that she is especially appreciative of student-created “Thank you,” notes.

**Experiential Learning at Sweetwater Organic Farm**

Sweetwater Organic Farm offers learners of all ages, from pre-school to adult workshops, the opportunity to participate in experience-based, hands-on learning to discover how organic farming contributes to student’s lives. Learning in a natural environment allows students to make personally meaningful connections between their academic studies and the real life applications of math, science, and other disciplines in their own life spaces. Field trips, or experiential learning opportunities, at Sweetwater Farm offer life-changing enrichment that compliments the curriculum and engages students through interactive exploration of local and organic agriculture, life sciences, sustainability, and nutrition.

Prior to attending a field trip at Sweetwater Organic Farm, educators are provided with an introductory PowerPoint presentation that addresses behavior expectations and what to wear, as well as building excitement as students are introduce to concepts they will be discovering at the farm. For each component of the field trip, there is a photograph, key vocabulary and questions to foster discussion. For students with exceptionalities, the Sweetwater Organic Farm is accessible to all learners.

During the workshop, Caroline Garber recalled a quote from a 3rd grade farm visitor that has driven Sweetwater’s Education Program: “Why did you put that carrot in the dirt?” Interactive learning experiences at Sweetwater Organic Farm raise awareness of food and where or how it grows, familiarizes students with sustainability concepts, offers hands-on learning of Earth and Life Science standards, provides students with the opportunity to explore the natural world, and provokes discussions about healthy eating and the value of good nutrition. Over 20,000 students from the Tampa Bay area, 6,000 during last year alone, have been a part of Sweetwater’s learning experiences. Led by a knowledgeable field guide, the program involves nine work stations that allow attendees to participate in the major steps of farming, including taking home a potted plant and harvesting a fresh, organic salad for lunch. The seed pot that students bring back from Sweetwater Farm would make an excellent long-term science investigation. Students will discover and engage in hands-on learning at a compost area, a seed life cycle learning station, a greenhouse, a water and well station, an herb garden, and the newly constructed plant trail and butterfly garden. Learners will meet “Sweetie Pig” and hand feed chickens as they discover animal’s contributions to a healthy environment. Finally, lunch time will include the student-harvested salad and a focus on the importance of nutrition. Throughout the tour, students will have opportunities to touch, taste, and smell the process of organic farming.

**What’s Your Vegetable IQ?**

In a delicious component of the workshop, attendees had the opportunity to sample some of Sweetwater Farm’s freshly grown, organic produce. In my own experience, I had never thought that I would enjoy the flavor of a raw radish. Caroline Garber proved me wrong. After we munched on garlic chives, star fruit and other Sweetwater produce, Caroline tested our “Veggie IQ.” Those delicious radishes can be grown in the short time of 25 days, with hot weather producing spicier radishes, as cooler weather grows milder radishes. Seed-bearing tomatoes and cucumbers were identified as fruit, including the 5 feet long and 154-pound giant cucumber. We learned that kale is extremely nutrient dense, as well as characteristics of kohlrabi, dill, bok choi and other vegetables. Romanesco cauliflower is featured in Salvador Dali’s *Still Life-Fast Moving* piece for the vegetable’s strikingly fractal appearance resulting from the branched meristem’s formation of a logarithmic spiral.

On the second day of our workshop, we were able to witness Sweetwater Organic Farm’s outstanding fields, orchards, greenhouse and well. The weather was cool, complimented by the charm of our host, and SCATTER members had the opportunity to see, smell, touch, and taste organic community farming. Every student would benefit from an afternoon at Sweetwater as they plant, harvest and enjoy the benefits of sustainable, organic farming.

For more information, or to inquire about bringing your class to Sweetwater Organic Farm, visit: <http://sweetwater-organic.org/>

*Mekayla Cook* October, 2016.