

FRESH from the Garden

Teacher Feature: LIVE from Lucky Leaf Gardens

The monthly Teacher Feature aims to share with the PHHI Garden Network ideas that are working for local teachers. We know that learning from others, gleaning ideas, and building a network of people resources is a great practice. So this month, we'd like to invite you to our first "Peer-to-Peer Networking Event." We hope to host a similar gathering several times throughout the



year to facilitate the opportunity to make connections with fellow gardening teachers. Mark your calendar, share with your colleagues, RSVP, and join us at Lucky Leaf Gardens.

When: Tuesday, April 9th

4:00 - 4:30 Refreshments, networking

4:30 - 5:30 Tour of microgreens production and resources available to local schools from Lucky Leaf. (Bring plastic bins to tote away *free* composted soil.)

Where: [Lucky Leaf Gardens](#), 7624 Hilliard Lane, Concord, 28025

Who: School personnel (elementary, middle and high school) working with school gardens or wanting to work with school gardens

Wow: This event is free of charge to you though we are paying for the event so please register by April 5. To RSVP, email Doug Vernon at dpvernon@ncsu.edu.



Reserve Sweet Potato Slips Now

Not sure what to do with your garden beds this summer? We've got an easy, fun (and delicious) crop to grow: Sweet potatoes! A few schools planted sweet potatoes last year and Amy

tried them in her home garden to make sure they were as low input as promised. Success! Once established, they were essentially a no maintenance crop until harvest when the students return in August.

Did you know that the sweet potato is the state vegetable for NC? Since 1971 North Carolina has ranked #1 in the nation in sweet potato production, producing over 60% of the US supply; that's 1.7 billion pounds of sweet potatoes harvested annually.



There are teams of researchers at NC State who work on sweet potatoes, from breeding and production to harvest and processing (sweet potato chips, anyone?). We've partnered with the horticulture department and are glad to offer six different varieties (different colors!) to our School Garden Network* this year. Even if you are outside our supply area, sweet potato slips can be purchased at your local farm supply store for a few dollars.

Planting should be done in May. A couple weeks of watering establishes good roots and the vines will grow, creating a mat of green leaves, while the sweet potatoes develop underground through the summer.

Several schools were very successful last year, one school even won 1st place at the NC State Fair for the most unusual sweet potato. With that friendly competitive spirit in mind, we decided to host a little competition of our own. We'll share more details later, but to stoke your excitement, here are the categories:

- Biggest sweet potato by weight
- Longest sweet potato
- Most unusual sweet potato
- Most creative use of a sweet potato
- Highest weight per square foot ratio
- Largest number of sweet potatoes per square foot
- Best recipe
- Best sweet potato character or mascot
- Best sweet potato poem or story
- Best informational video



*If you are in Kannapolis City Schools, Cabarrus County, Rowan County or Union County, reserve your slips using this [Google Docs form](#) by March 22. If you are outside these areas and interested in sweet potato slips, email [Doug Vernon](#) to assess availability.



In the Garden Now



Plant

Though we assume more cold spells are coming in the next month or so, the crops we are planting now are typically able to withstand those cold temperatures, though it may slow germination of seeds that have been planted.

One of our goals is that your students will have the opportunity to harvest the crops that they plant while school is in session. So, if you haven't started planting your garden, get your plan together and get rolling. We're here to help, if you need a push!

Most of the local garden centers have cool season vegetable transplants available to purchase now. If you don't have plants ready to transplant from your own indoor seeding effort, consider purchasing what you need so not to miss the planting window. If you wait too long, cool season crops will bolt before reaching maturity.

Harvest

For those who got an early start to planting, you may be harvesting some radishes or lettuce by the end of March. Cold temperatures will slow growth so don't be disappointed if it takes longer than the planting guides suggest to reach fully mature veggies.

When taking your students to the garden to harvest, remember to have them wash hands before harvesting and wash hands again after working in the garden.

Teach students to always wash produce just prior to using/consuming.

Maintenance

If you use season extenders, you will want to have your frost blankets and sand bags handy for nights that get below 35 degrees, especially if you have young seedlings germinating. If you have strawberry plants in bloom when nights get into the 20s (hopefully not below), cover them with a frost blanket.

At this point you shouldn't experience much in the way of insect problems, but be advised they are on their way too! Great life cycle lessons come from their entrance into the garden when it does happen.

Irrigation is the key to keeping your garden growing well once planted. Watering daily may not be necessary but checking the garden for moisture is a daily habit you need to practice. Make sure that when the beds are watered that it's not just wetting the top inch of soil. They should be watered well enough that the water reaches the root zone. Develop a system that works for your class to make this happen daily. First thing in the morning is ideal if you can make that work with your schedule. However, anytime of day is better than not at all.

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Questions? Contact us!

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