

The Dirt on Food

Fairhaven
Farm Camp
gives kids a taste
of cultivation,
preparation



Laura Plaut, director of Farm Camp at Bobbibrook Farm in Fairhaven, shows a baby turkey to a nervous Iris Hicks, 7, and asks Hicks if she would like to hold it, Thursday, June 23. The camp is put on to educate children about where their food comes from and how to cultivate their own food. The camp runs every week this summer except for two weeks when Camp Pizza is held instead. Katie Greene / The Bellingham Herald

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Laura Plaut holds a turkey as seven children gather around her one morning at Bobbibrook Farm. "I think turkeys might have been named by Dr. Seuss," Plaut said during Farm Camp in Fairhaven.

For one, the tom — boy turkeys are called toms, she told them — has a snood.

It's a piece of skin that normally droops and hangs over the turkey's beak. But at the moment the snood on the turkey looked like a small, squat horn.

"We're making him so nervous, his snood is all up like that," Plaut said to the children, who were among the 20 youngsters at camp that day, some wearing T-shirts that read "Get dirt on your shirt."

The camp is the signature program of the nonprofit Common Threads Farm and runs during summer. Launched by Plaut, Common Threads' goal is to connect children to food, their community and the environment through what she called seed-to-table education.

At Farm Camp, that included plenty of hands-on stuff for the 3-

► Additional information about Common Threads Farm is online at commonthreadsfarm.org, at laura@commonthreadsfarm.org and at 360-927-1590. The farm also can be found on Facebook.

► The server hosting the website has been down, but is expected to be back up by Sunday, June 26.

► Each session of Farm Camp is 9 a.m. to noon Monday through Thursday. Recommended ages are 3 to 7.

► Common Threads' other programs include Camp Pizza and Whatcom County School Garden Collective. The nonprofit also has launched a new program with Whatcom Volunteer Center and Northwest Youth Services to install a garden at Northwest Youth Services.

to 10-year-old children, who split into groups and take turns caring for the turkeys and chickens — do they have enough food and clean water? — as well as the garden.

"Growing stuff takes work and attention," Plaut said, which is what the camp's workers and volunteers emphasize to the children.

There's also a story time, an art project and cooking lessons.

SEED OF AN IDEA

Plaut is the founder and director of Bellingham-based Common Threads Farm, which combines her background as an educator, mother and nonprofit administrator. Her desire to teach children

about food choices grew when her son was born nearly eight years ago.

"Suddenly, my awareness of all the consumer messages that are directed at about three feet high really heightened," she said.

And Plaut realized that while she was highly educated, she didn't know how to grow her own food.

"Suddenly, that was mortifying to me," she said.

Then there was a deep yearning to feel more connected.

Together, those ideas make up the Common Threads mission:

► Food competency: Teaching

See **CAMP**, A10

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Sunday, June 26, 2011

\$1.50

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Worms teach lesson about food cycle

CAMP from A1

people how to grow and prepare healthy, delicious food.

► **Food literacy:** Encouraging people to understand how their daily food choices affect their health, their community and the environment.

► **Food equity:** Making sure there is healthy, culturally appropriate food for everybody.

Farm Camp's current location at Bobbibrook Farm was made possible by Bobbi Vollendorff, who opened her roughly 1½ acres in Fairhaven to Common Threads.

"I did it because this piece of property is so wonderful it needs to be shared," Vollendorff said. "My goal is to turn the property into some sort of an urban land trust. And this was a first step in doing that because the property is so special that it should be available to the community at large."

She also praised her neighbors on Mill Street, Chuck and Donna Freeman, for sharing their property, allowing the greenhouse and chicken coop to be located there, as well as other camp activities for the children.

"The neighbors are supportive and helpful," Vollendorff said.

GATHERERS, COOKS

Back with the turkey, a heritage breed known as bourbon red, Plaut pointed to the beard, which resembled a brush sticking out of the bird's chest.

The beard's length reveals the tom's age, as it grows about an inch every year, the children learned. Plaut encouraged them to gently touch the red caruncles, which looked like lumpy skin growth at its throat.

Liam Cassidy, 7, did.

"It's kind of like bumpy smooth," the Bellingham boy said.

Nearby in the garden was a sign with a quote from Mahatma Gandhi: "To forget how to dig the earth and to tend to the soil is to forget ourselves."



From left, Aleah Holland, 10, Aila Elder, 4, volunteer Alexis Ressler and Iris Hicks, 7, gather lettuce for burritos at Farm Camp Thursday, June 23, at Bobbibrook Farm in Fairhaven. The camp is put on by the nonprofit Common Threads Farm to educate children about where their food comes from and how to cultivate their own food.

Katie Greene / The Bellingham Herald

In that garden were beds of calendula, potatoes, summer squash, carrots, beets, lettuce, cabbage, chard, strawberries and peas.

Two groups of children squatted near them, gazing down at two plates of kitchen scraps that included eggshells, raw Brussels sprouts, avocado and carrot peelings. They were deciding whether the scraps could be used to feed the farm's earthworms, which help compost food scraps — at least the ones not fed to the animals.

"Kids love worms," Plaut said.

The worms have five hearts, and breathe through their skin and do other things that people can't do, she said. Worms also teach children about life cycles and food cycles, Plaut explained. The exercise taps into what we consider waste that actually could be a resource, she said.

"The concept of waste is one I think bears some scrutiny," she said. "Everything in a healthy system cycles back around."

After Plaut released the turkey, which wandered off,

the group of children she was teaching went to wash their hands prior to their cooking lesson.

"Can you take a couple of harvesters to the garden?" she said to volunteer Jennifer Hartke, a Western Washington University student and nanny to one of the kid campers.

The children were directed to pluck one piece of red Russian kale, one piece of dinosaur kale, one leaf of chard and one beet leaf that they would chop or tear for the vegetable fried rice, made with brown rice, they cooked for that day's meal.

"We're going to do a lot of grating today, and we're also going to do some peeling," Plaut said to the youngsters. "Who knows what the word mince means?"

Together, the children chopped onions, garlic and broccoli; grated carrots and purple cabbage; read the fried rice recipe; learned the difference between tablespoon and teaspoon as they measured ingredients; and

sautéed the rice.

"I'm getting all dirty," Siena Stiles, 6, said with a smile as she grated cabbage.

"You're getting very purple," Plaut said, referring to the color of the cabbage and the purple jacket the Bellingham girl was wearing.

When they were done cooking the rice, Plaut dished out portions to the children who were hungry, then asked what they thought of the meal they helped make.

Then it was on to their next activity.

To Vollendorff, what Common Threads offers is of "tremendous value."

"They're teaching youngsters about where their food comes from and how to make food choices, how to be good stewards of their environment," Vollendorff said, "how to garden, how to grow things for themselves, how to be independent."

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