

# Students grow in garden classroom with top chef

By ERIN ROSE  
STAFF WRITER

**FAR HILLS** – Learning in the great outdoors, students from the Willow School of Gladstone got to taste chocolate mint, smell a root beer plant and dig in the dirt all in one morning with a celebrated local chef.

In a collaborative educational effort called the "Garden to Plate Initiative," the fourth graders joined Bernards Inn Executive Chef Corey Heyer at his gardens in Far Hills last Friday, May 22.

The chef keeps herb and vegetable gardens at a pristine private residence on Holland Road, growing both the classic and the exotic, including cilantro, rose-scented geraniums and chocolate mint.

All of the students have been taking part in starting a garden at their school, and took lessons from the day's activities back to the rest of their classmates.

"The fourth grade kids have been using math to lay out the plots and helping to plan out the entire garden," said Kate Walsh, head of the Willow School. "This is a perfect project for our students because it integrates what they have learned to value in science and nutrition, and provides an opportunity for service to the community."

The curriculum at the Willow School, a private K-8 school, emphasizes sensitivity to the environment and sustainability.

As part of their science and social studies program, students in the school's eighth grade have also been taking part in other community service gardening projects, including planting a small flower garden at Town Hall in Bedminster on Tuesday, May 26.

The eighth graders worked with landscape architect Jeff Charlesworth from the Oldwick firm Back to Nature to design a planting scheme for the garden. The company focuses on sustainable and environmentally sensitive landscape designs.

The students are also scheduled to present a gardening



Photo by Erin Rose

Under the supervision of Corey Heyer, executive chef of the Bernards Inn in Bernardsville, Willow School students, from left, Meghan Donovan of Chester, Grace Wiehl of Long Valley and Chad Fischer of Caliform prepare to plant vegetables at the inn's private farm in Far Hills on Friday, May 22.

plan to the Mendham Borough Council on Wednesday, May 27. The proposal focuses on using certain fertilizers to ensure they do not have any effect on storm water quality.

The fourth graders visit to the Bernards Inn's garden last Friday was part of the school's overall emphasis on hands-on learning.

While at the gardens, the students sampled seven different types of mint that the chef grows on the property. Many favored the chocolate mint.

"I think it is best suited for a pastry dessert," said Heyer, who started the garden last year and uses the produce on the menu at the historic Bernards Inn in Bernardsville. "It would go well with strawberries or raspberries."

They also discovered a root beer plant, an exotic South American herb whose leaves smell exactly like the fizzy drink.

While the plant may have been created in South America, the chef buys many of his plants locally, including the root

beer plant, which he purchased at a farm near Hackettstown.

"I try really hard not to get things from too far away," he said. "By growing these items ourselves, we are doing our part to help reduce the pollution harmful to our environment."

"We also know that what is being put into the soil of our garden and all of the produce is being picked by hand," he added. "Everything grown in our garden this year was started from seed right here in New Jersey."

Heyer uses the herbs and vegetables from the gardens at the inn, and is frequently at the site, picking different herbs or even the numerous different types of lettuce grown there for that day's menu.

"We can plan a lot of what we cook around the garden," he said. "We can go and pick lettuces at three or four o'clock and serve them to a customer in a salad at six."

The vegetable garden is every green thumb's dream. A series of raised platforms, or beds, were created out of cedar



Photo by Erin Rose

Bedminster Township residents Rowan Moynihan, and Jack Bravstein, students at the Willow School in Gladstone, plant some tomatoes at the Bernards Inn's private vegetable garden in Far Hills on Friday, May 22, as part of a school project.

planks and filled in with soil. Each bed also has its own irrigation spike, and is watered daily.

While it was too early in the season to sample many of the vegetables growing in the garden, Heyer gave students the opportunity to taste or smell every herb.

Included in the gardens were several different types of lettuce, including the classic romaine lettuce and even more exotic flavors, such as dandelions.

"They all have different flavors that make each bite of a salad different," he said.

The children were also given the opportunity to help the chef plant some new vegetables, in-

cluding special heirloom tomatoes and radishes.

The children seemed more than happy to get covered in dirt and water from the planting.

When asked about their favorite part of the day, most of the kids said, "getting dirty."

"I really liked tasting the different mints and planting the tomatoes," said student Chase Fort of Bedminster.

"I liked doing the planting," added Bedminster resident Rowan Moynihan.

The class will return to the farm in September, when all of the plants have had time to mature and produce vegetables, for a cooking class and tasting.

"They will be able to see what

they invested in," Walsh said.

Heyer said he hopes the experience will "someday motivate them to plant their own garden."

According to information on its website, [www.willowschool.org](http://www.willowschool.org), the school tries to "create an environment that represents the connections between learning and the natural world."

It is a private, coeducational day school for students in grades K-8 on a 34-acre site in Gladstone.

The Bernards Inn was established in 1907 in downtown Bernardsville. It recently marked its 100th anniversary with a major renovation and redesign.