

EARTH DAY 2008

Garrett Morgan students raising worms for Earth Day project

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Here's some Earth Day dirt: Cleveland teenagers dig worms.

Really.

And while some of the sophomores at Garrett Morgan High School don't seem so hot about feeding rotting lunchroom leftovers to thousands of wriggling red worms each week, the worms themselves are pretty cool.

"They're really just like pets - you just feed them and they reproduce like bunnies," said sophomore Marissa Latkovic, one of 20 students in teacher Emmett Keller's biology class who are elbow deep in the dirty job of vermicomposting.

Vermicomposting - that's the sterile, scientific word for how red earthworms transform soggy, smelly cafeteria garbage into worm poop.

"Yeah, that's about it, but it also really ties into our curriculum," said Keller, who hooked up with the Cleveland-based Earth Day Coalition last fall to come up with the worm-composting program.

The West Side high school was one of eight schools with projects recently featured at the coalition's Student Environmental Congress.

The goal of the school and the coalition was not simply to come up with an Earth Day science project to display for one day, but to promote an eco-culture among the students, coalition spokeswoman Nicole Vaudrin said.

"And this compost is really high-quality stuff that will go to good use," Vaudrin said.

The students at Garrett Morgan, a Cleveland science magnet high school, plan to use the soil produced by 60 pounds of worms to fertilize a garden in front of the school in the coming weeks. Keller said he already has volunteers signed up to come back through the summer to tend the garden.

These kids can see hands-on how nutrients move through an ecosystem," Keller said. "They see first how organic matter like the lettuce moves through the worms, then becomes part of the soil and finally how those

nutrients are taken up by the plants."

The Garrett Morgan students will also teach vermicomposting to their counterparts from an East Side suburban high school as part of the ongoing Earth Day education, Vaudrin said.

Earth Day is today [bbe: April 22:]-NT%>, but many parks, communities and organizations held events last weekend to commemorate a movement that began officially in 1970.

That year also began a decade marked by groundbreaking environmental legislation, from the establishment of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air Act that same year to the Clean Water Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

There are, of course, dozens of other environmental efforts locally and nationwide, but vermicomposting is an increasingly popular activity because it can be done inside and because it has a direct payoff -- nutrient-rich soil for a summer garden, Vaudrin said.

But the leaders of the Garrett Morgan worm project are getting another benefit this week: They will attend the sound check Thursday for Grammy award-winning recording artist Alicia Keys at Cleveland State University's Wolstein Center. She is performing here as part of her "As I Am" tour.

Keys and automaker Lexus will also donate \$2,000 to the school under a "Keys to Innovation" environmental initiative to honor urban schools that have successfully put environmental programs in their schools and communities.

Garrett Morgan will then compete against nine other schools across the country for a shot at \$10,000 for the school's programs. Each school must submit a plan, and the winners will be announced in September.

Keller, a second-year teacher who grew up on a farm in rural Geauga County, said that's quite a tribute for an idea that was simply just to get teenagers involved in an environmental movement that isn't all about cracking down on bad behavior.

"So many times in environmental education, kids hear the don'ts' -- don't litter, don't use Styrofoam, don't drive in a car too often,' but this is a do,' " he said.

"This is a proactive approach where they can benefit their

environment, reduce organic waste and have some fun doing it."

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WEATHER

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Video link:

http://videos.cleveland.com/plain-dealer/2008/04/cleveland_students_dig_worms.html