

Learning by growing

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Natural resources students sell plants they cultivate in David Douglas High School's greenhouse

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Susan Krueger started buying hydroponic lettuce grown by David Douglas High School's natural resources students as a token of her support for the program.

But when aphids found their way into the greenhouse during the December holiday vacation and wiped out most of the crop, Krueger, a learning specialist at the school, realized she was hooked.

"It was so hard to go back to buying the dry, tasteless lettuce at the grocery store," she said, which didn't compare to the sweet taste of freshly harvested lettuce from the greenhouse.

Thankfully for Krueger and other lettuce-buying regulars, the students are back in the business of selling their organic produce and other nursery products at weekly open door sales, held from 3:15 to 4:45 p.m. Thursdays. The public sales take place outside the greenhouse, behind the football stadium near 130th Avenue and Market Street.

Keep in mind that lettuce and basil sell out quickly. Both are grown hydroponically, or soil-free, an increasingly popular agricultural method that takes up less space and allows for year-round yields.

"This lettuce is planted in organic coconut rinds," said senior Jennifer Neyenhuis, class business manager. She admitted the aphid problem — among other challenges — was cause for concern about the operation's bottom line.

The class also grows and sells soil-based plants, ranging from hanging flower baskets to houseplants to vegetable and herb starts.

But more than plants flourish in David Douglas' greenhouse, built two years ago primarily to serve



Student Alicia Kuhnau (left) helps David and Klarice Anderson pick out plants at the weekly sale by the natural resources class at David Douglas High School. The sale is from 3:15 to 4:45 p.m. Thursdays outside the greenhouse, behind the football stadium.

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seniors in the Natural Resources Certificate of Advanced Mastery program. As they tend to their produce or come up with alternatives to pesticides, the students themselves are growing, instructor John Bier said.

"This is not just about lettuce and fuchsias. It's about perseverance," he said, calling the learning hands-on and multi-disciplinary.

Bier, who leads one of David Douglas' eight CAM programs, had long been a proponent of "learning by doing" when he and his stu-

dents persuaded the district to approve a \$5,000 loan for the greenhouse building and equipment. In the past, Bier has helped students with school projects ranging from building wetlands to restoring salmon.

"So this was a natural progression," said Principal John Harrington.

Although it was a big-ticket item, Harrington said he was convinced the greenhouse and Bier's plan to pay off the loan through plant sales could offer students valuable life

lessons.

"These kids will leave with skills they can take with them regardless of where they end up," he said.

So far, the students have made all of their loan payments for the greenhouse, thanks to the open door sales they call "Keep Bier out of Jail Sales" — an homage to their teacher's personal investment in the program.

"This has been a learning process for us all. I'm not trained to run a greenhouse," he said. "This, alone, is like a full-time job. It ties

me to home. I can't leave for more than three or four days."

But it's all worthwhile when students are excited about learning or even too immersed to realize they're learning, Bier said. He also likes that the greenhouse is a place for students, particularly those loaded with honors classes, to get away from the books and just get their hands dirty.

Learning to slow down from time to time, he said, is a skill they'll use forever.



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