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UGA Extension's Grow It Know It program helps children plant, grow and eat food

Lindsay Thomas | Contributor Mar 6, 2019

Students participate in a cooking lab as part of the Grow It Know It program. (Photo courtesy Andie Bisceglia)

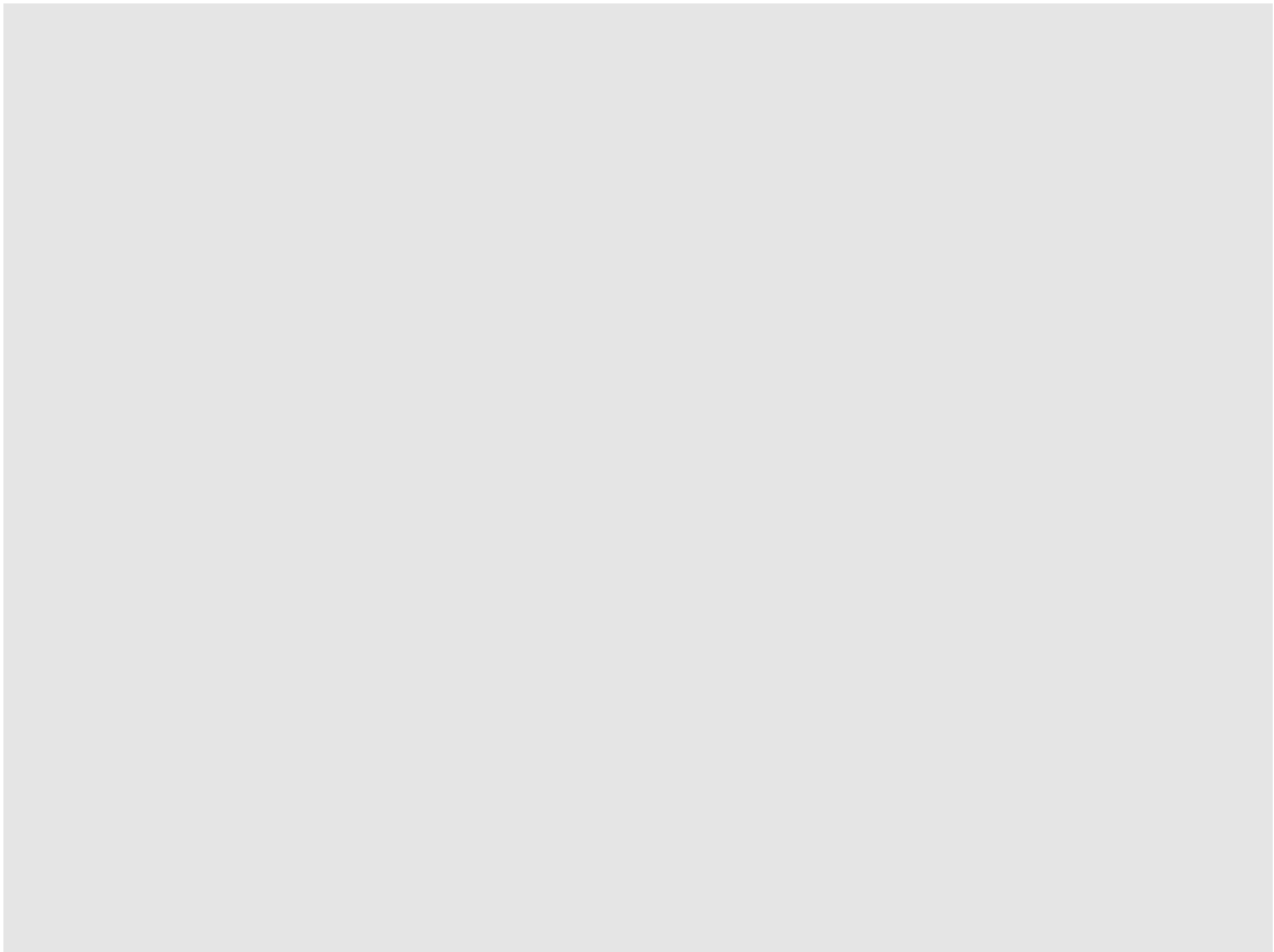
Learning how to tend to a garden or cook with fresh produce might seem unusual in a middle school classroom, but the University of Georgia Extension's Grow It Know It program provides this unique experience in Clarke and Barrow counties.

GIKI is a partnership between Clarke County and Barrow County schools, UGA Extension, UGA Office of Service Learning and UGArden. The program hopes to highlight issues such as poverty, food insecurity and environmental sustainability through hands-on activities in the classroom. GIKI also connects students to their community with programs such as "Meals in the Middle," which hosts student-powered benefit dinners that raise money for local causes.

GIKI hires Americorps VISTAs to assist teachers and students in Agricultural Sciences and Family and Consumer Sciences in Barrow County. Joshua Truitt is the VISTA for Barrow County schools, and he spends his time conducting food labs or working with students in the garden at Russell Middle School and the Center for Innovative Teaching.



Students learn how to complete tasks such as lining the sides of the plant beds with mulch or pine straw, planting plants, turning compost and planting seeds in the classroom. They also have the opportunity to cook and try new recipes with the same food they grow in the garden, such as kale or chia seeds.



Two students stand next to a compost pile created as part of the Grow It Know It program. (Photo courtesy Andie Bisceglia)

Truitt said his favorite part of the job is seeing the students experience new foods and expand their knowledge while also having fun. He often hears the phrase “I usually don’t like this type of food, but this tastes really good.”

As a VISTA, Truitt works directly with teachers to incorporate lessons about topics such as gardening and composting. Laura Payne is one of the fifth-grade teachers at the Center for Innovative Teaching who works with Truitt. She said kids from four classes came together to design the garden themselves. GIKI allows students to take ownership of what they are growing and eating.

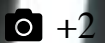
Payne said the hands-on learning provides lifelong skills, and students are more willing to try new foods like kale when they put their time and work into it.

GIKI has been a part of Clarke County Schools for five years. A USDA grant helped the program expand to Barrow County last summer. Andie Bisceglia, the grant coordinator, said even though GIKI is new to Barrow County, school gardens were already in place at some of the schools. GIKI is working with schools to provide more resources for the programs they already have in place.

“The great thing has been just how ready they were for this program, how excited they were and grateful,” she said.

Bisceglia’s plans for the future include researching other communities in Georgia that would benefit from this program and bringing elements of GIKI which are successful in Barrow County back to Clarke County. GIKI provided hands-on teacher training sessions throughout this year, and Bisceglia wants to incorporate similar programming in GIKI in Clarke County. She said the strongest programs are the ones that have a team of teachers working together at the school.

After less than a year in schools, Payne said that the students have already learned a lot about creating a garden, but there are many lessons to come once the garden actually starts growing. The USDA grant provides funds for GIKI in Barrow County for another two years, GIKI is meant to help schools in Barrow county create a sustainable program so this experiential learning can remain long after.



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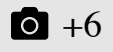
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