



September 19, 2008

Harvesting knowledge

By Julia Melloni
Correspondent

A garden with international flare has been blossoming behind Hunt Middle School in the New North End of Burlington under the tutelage of Odette Fan, a native of the Congo. Fan, who has been living in the United States since 2001, has been teaching Swahili in the garden to Burlington's newest middle-school-aged refugees from Somalia and Burundi while planting an abundance of fruits and vegetables that are now ready for harvest.

On Tuesday, Fan and children from the Burlington after-school program harvested tomatoes, purple beans and Swiss chard while others weeded and snacked on cherry tomatoes. The program offers a variety of activities, including gardening and classes for English Language Learners. Children participating in the garden program took home vegetables throughout the summer and brought plants home to plant in their yards or in pots outside their homes.

"I like the tomatoes," said Madina Dayo, 14. "Sometimes we cook them with soup and sometimes with rice." Dayo said she speaks seven languages and currently is working on English.

Fan taught Somali Bantu and Burundi children Swahili this summer because it is the one language most Africans speak and is the common language spoken in refugee camps, said Kathy Orwell, Hunt Middle School after-school program director. Many of the languages like Mai Mai are not written languages. Learning a written language for the first time can be overwhelming, Orwell added.

"It is difficult to acquire English," she said. "It is important for these children to learn their own language with fluency. That will help them be more successful with English."

Fan, whose family still runs a farm in the Congo, started working in the school garden in June and used different types of squash and other vegetables to entice the children to dig in the dirt. Fan said many of the children were shy and were even reluctant to pick vegetables to take home. She used Swahili and played games with the kids to loosen them up.

"I wanted to plant all the foods that the kids love and that are easy to grow and grow fast," Fan said. "In the beginning it was hard, but in the end it's a joy to see what they have."

Jim Flint, executive director of Friends of Burlington Gardens, said the fledgling garden is a work in progress. It started out with just one simple raised bed four years ago and now has several beds, a fence, a shed and, for the first time as of this summer, a water spigot.

"We asked the African children to help us carry water over the last couple of summers so we could water the plants and we felt so badly about it," Orwell said. "They said we had to carry water in Africa all the time, it's no problem," Orwell said.