

Giff Hill and Iowa State Partner for More Sustainable St. John

Written by Mauri Elbel

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Iowa State University students and Giff Hill School officials walk the property line to record GPS coordinates for future property development.

Students at Giff Hill School are on their way to making St. John a more sustainable place to live thanks to hands-on help from horticulturist experts at Iowa State University.

EARTH (Education and Resiliency through Horticulture), an environmental and horticulture immersion project intended to develop landscapes and food production, is being implemented into the science curriculum at Giff Hill's middle and high schools.

"St. John is not sustainable," said Kris Bennett, the school's science teacher and program coordinator for the new project. "Everything is imported — plus it is expensive."

Although St. John has a plentiful amount of sun, its soil and water are not conducive to growing plants and vegetables, according to the teacher.

"This is where we need their (ISU's) help with learning how to build irrigation systems, create healthier, nutrient-rich soil, help with plant selection and management practices," Bennett said. "Everything is done specifically for St. John using native plants grown with organic methods specific to the island."

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The five-year, million dollar project funded by a private donor on St. John through ISU kicked off last week at the school. The land-grant university heads up a similar project in Uganda which will serve as a model for EARTH at Giff Hill School. A handful of ISU's horticulture undergraduates are on island for the next six weeks to get the project up and running.

St. John is not considered a resilient community due to the fact that it relies heavily on outside sources for food, according to Michael Reinert, ISU's assistant professor of horticulture who is heading up the local project. If a natural disaster prevented goods from being transported into the island, St. John runs a serious risk of being without food within a few days.

"We want to create a positive perception of agriculture and food production with the Giff Hill students," Reinert said.

He said the project has three main goals: to educate students on how to grow food in a way they can repeat at home, to get them to interact with ISU undergraduates to learn the benefits of obtaining a college education, and to inspire students to become future business owners on St. John, going away to receive a higher education and then returning to apply the knowledge on their island home.

"The really neat thing about this project is that it is about St. John — the people and the students," Reinert said. "We are trying to bring not only knowledge but excitement about horticulture into their classrooms so they have a better understanding about what it means to live here."

Two ISU horticulture undergraduate students will spend 12 weeks on St. John in the fall, spring and summer working with Giff Hill students to design and build landscape and food production projects while giving them a better understanding of local conditions. Food produced will go directly into the school's lunch program and may eventually be available for students to take home.

"This is essentially place-based education where we are using St. John resources to develop landscapes and grow food," Bennett said. "Instead of sitting in a classroom, these students will

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go outside and experience in-the-ground science.”

ISU has already erected a weather station to record scientific information such as light, temperature, wind, moisture and soil conditions which will help students grow food. Additional plans include building a trail between the upper and lower campuses for students to safely pass between and landscaping to create natural shading for the school’s currently unprotected outdoor classrooms.

While the students at Giff Hill will gain a more diverse education, ISU students are also broadening their horizons by interacting with new students and terrain, said Reinert.

Reinert said the university was surprised to learn the students on St. John were quite similar to their stateside counterparts who have allowed video games and technology to replace more traditional pass times.

“Today’s students are very removed from their environment,” he said. “And we are trying to bring back into today’s culture what the older generations already understand.”