

Art and gardening cultivate math skills at magnet school

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With plantings of loquat, banana and peach trees, muscadines vines and blueberry bushes, Apalachee Tapestry Magnet School of the Arts may seem more like an orchard than an elementary school. That's the goal of art teacher Ashley Chandler as she transforms the campus into an artful garden filled with edibles as well as artworks inspired by famous artists.



Angel Lewis is proud to share her artwork with others. AMANDA

In graduate school at Florida State University, Chandler studied art education and was encouraged to identify a social justice issue to focus on during the development of her thesis. "I realized gardening and taking care of the environment has always been with me. I did my research on integrating art making with building structures, gardening and landscape design. The COCA grant gave me the opportunity to have my graduate research actually come to fruition."

Chandler applied for and received an Arts Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts. With the grant funds, she was able to purchase materials to implement her "Growing Light" project. With a friend's help, she started with the garden trellis. Chandler recognized the geometry of the trellis structure would provide an opportunity to introduce students to Piet

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Mondrian, a Dutch artist who helped shape modern abstract art.

Additionally, it would help them practice math skills.

“A lot of them are struggling with fractions,” Chandler said. “I introduced them to Mondrian’s ‘Composition II with Red, Blue and Yellow’ and showed them they could divide their paper into fractions to create artwork inspired by him. They saw they could test themselves and practice fractions using art.”

Students also got the opportunity to study one of Mondrian’s most recognizable paintings ‘Broadway Boogie-Woogie.’

The painting is composed of intersecting lines of yellow, punctuated with squares and rectangles of blue and red. Fourth-grader Aaron Webster said “when I look at it, I think of a city. There’s little red cubes and I think of those as little shops. The big cubes are work buildings to me.”

Using this work of art for inspiration, Aaron and his fourth and fifth-grade classmates set out to re-create the spirit of the artwork onto the garden trellis structures by painting similar shapes in bold primary colors.

“For some reason, I really like painting,” Aaron shared. “When the paint goes on smooth and fills in all the little dents of the wood, it’s satisfying.” He also ap-

preciates the lasting effect of his artwork. “This garden is going to be a big part of the school. The trellis could probably be up for years and I get happiness knowing I helped make it.”

Fourth-grader Angel Lewis had similar sentiments. “This project helps the school,” she said, “and I’m proud to share it with other people.” When looking toward the future and what else she has to share, Angel said “I want to be an artist when I grow up and I want to get better, so I can teach.”

Chandler also has her mind on the future and this garden project is part of that forward thinking. Aside from patiently waiting for the perennial and pollinator sections, annual rotating crops, and food forest to fill in, she’s also working on a Fibonacci spiral herb garden.

Additionally, she has plans to introduce other famous artists like Claude Monet and Frida Kahlo, whose work is rooted to the natural world.

“Everybody has a creative spirit in them and if we can tie art to nature and gardening that can only help us be more sustainable as people, help our environment, and cultivate a spirit of stewardship,” said Chandler. “Adopting that spirit within each child is really important as they grow up. They’ll take that with them and continue making places better. It’s a game-changer when people start to care about how places look and how they make us feel.”

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).