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TAMIAMI PARK FAIRGROUNDS

Sparking a child's interest in farms

In honor of Agriculture Literacy Day and on the first day of the Dade County Youth Fair, children listened to Homestead's vice mayor read a book about animals growing a garden.

BY ELIZABETH CARAM

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Sitting cross-legged, a group of about 20 children listened attentively to Homestead Vice Mayor Lynda Bell as she read a book called *How Groundhog's Garden Grew* at the Dade County Youth Fair on Thursday.

Bell pointed to an illustration of a long, thin green sprout, and asked, "What is that?"

The kids yelled out eagerly, "Asparagus!"

If anyone knows their veggies, it was this group.

All belong to 4-H, the youth development program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"Kids go to the grocery store and see oranges on a table; they need to know where those oranges came from," said Nikenge Cook, with 4-H of Miami-Dade County. "It is important for them to know how essential agriculture really is."

The students attended the book reading in the fair's Sunshine Pavilion as part of the second annual Agriculture Literacy Day. Volunteers in 2,000 Florida classrooms read the same book Thursday to students in grades kindergarten through three.

Here in Miami-Dade County, more than 40 volunteers visited 32 schools.

The book, by author Lynne Cherry, is about a squirrel's lesson to a groundhog about how to nurture a fruit and vegetable garden. It was chosen as part of a statewide effort to increase agriculture awareness in children.

Eight Florida teachers selected the book -- which features characters Little Groundhog and his pal Squirrel -- because of its lesson and colorful illustrations that children find appealing.

Cherry's book is not the only one that can spark a child's interest in agriculture. The Dade County Farm Bureau put together a barn full of them.

The wooden, 4-foot-tall, shiny-red barn sits on wheels and is intended to be used in schools across the county. It's featured in the Farm Bureau's station at the fairgrounds.

"The barn contains learning tools like books and videos for kids and teachers," said Katie Edwards, director of the Dade County Farm Bureau.

Jeffrey Hyter-Hunt, 8, checked out the barn as Bell read. He said he liked the story in the book.

"It helped me learn more about agriculture," he said, clutching a goodie bag with bookmarks, pencils and a

book about agriculture.

Other giveaways were not typical kid fare: corn and tomatoes grown by local farmers.

"The kids need to understand that a lot of the produce they eat comes from our county's farms," Bell said.

"Fruits and vegetables end up at grocery stores, but farms grew them first," she said.