A group of twenty brightly dressed kindergarteners rustled beneath the shade pavilion at Matthew Whaley Elementary School as they curiously fixed their eyes on Genrose Lashinger, who held turnips in hands adorned with fire engine red fingernails. Lashinger is the head of Mattey’s Garden, the school’s community gardening program, and she had devoted that day’s lesson to the life cycle of turnips.

“Do you know of any other foods we eat that come from the ground?” she asked the students. Twenty tiny hands shot into the air and the children named vegetables such as carrots, potatoes, and rutabagas.

Every single one of the 500 children at Matthew Whaley spends time working and learning in Mattey’s Garden each month, and each grade level is responsible for a certain area of the garden. All of the garden activities are aligned with the school’s science curriculum and are taught by Master Gardeners, who are local volunteers certified in their knowledge of gardening.

In recent years, there have been burgeoning childhood development issues—rising obesity rates, the popularity of sedentary, indoor activities such as video games, a lack of interest in science-related professions, and a general detachment from food. Those involved with Mattey’s Garden believe that the program is helping to address a number of these issues.

Denise Corbett, the director of the Student Health Initiative Program (SHIP), which partially funds Mattey’s Garden, says that their ultimate goal is to “promote healthy eating and physical activity—and what better way to do that than through gardening? There’s all this research that shows that kids who grow their own fruits and vegetables are more likely to eat them.”

Vega Brown, Matthew Whaley’s cafeteria manager, makes a point of using the produce the children have grown in Mattey’s Garden in the school lunches whenever she can. “Some of the kids have never had the stuff we grow out in the garden,” Brown observed, “so it is new to them, but they are willing to try it, and once they try it, they enjoy it.”

Lashinger also described Mattey’s Garden as “a real growing atmosphere. It gives children the opportunity not only to learn about how plants grow, but it’s also an opportunity to be a little freer outdoors, and learn about eating good, fresh vegetables and herbs out of the garden.”

SHIP, a partnership between the Williamsburg James City County School Division and the Williamsburg Community Health Foundation, conducts a biennial survey that has produced data backing the effectiveness of programs, such as Mattey’s Garden, that promote a greater connection with food, healthier eating, and a more physical lifestyle. “We’ve seen changes in terms of increases in fruit and vegetable consumption…a decrease in television viewing time, and an increase in physical activity,” Corbett said, referencing the 2006-2010 surveys.

Mattey’s Garden is an educational tool that plucks children from the classroom and engages them in hands-on learning in an outdoor setting. “Instead of just learning about it in a book or on the internet, they’re actually out there feeling the soil. You can talk about loam and sand and clay, but until
you’re actually sticking your hands in it, you don’t really realize what it is,” said Lashinger. “It’s the same thing with plants and the whole life cycle. The children remember it because they have experienced it...they’ve not just read about it. That, to me, says we’re doing the right thing.”

“Everything we do is SOL driven,” Lashinger further explained. The Virginia SOLs, or Standards of Learning, are integral tests that are used to monitor the quality of education within the Commonwealth. An analysis of the annual School Report Cards provided by the Virginia Department of Education showed that since the dedication of the garden in 1999, Matthew Whaley has seen an increase of 22% in their science SOL pass rates. In the past few years, they’ve almost reached a 100% pass rate for the science SOLs.

While scientific knowledge and understanding, from botany to food production, are highlighted in the garden, the children are exposed to a whole range of other issues through multiple disciplines. “Science SOL’s are especially addressed with the lessons in the garden, but there is also literature, writing, math, and some social studies, too,” Lashinger said. First graders weigh apples and graph the spectrum of their colors. Third graders, armed with the task of writing a riddle about a natural object, search for inspiration in the garden. Fourth graders plant historic Virginia crops such as sweet potatoes, peanuts, cotton, and tobacco to accompany their social studies unit on the history of the Commonwealth.

“We try to tie the garden into literature whenever possible,” added kindergarten teacher Kerry Armbruster. Her class is currently reading The Very Hungry Caterpillar. “We learn how the caterpillar has to eat, eat, eat,” she said, “and then we raise our own caterpillars here in the classroom and feed them parsley from the garden.”

Armbruster, who has been a fixture at Matthew Whaley for nearly 14 years, and has used the garden since its inception said, “It’s like an outdoor classroom and the kids are able to use all five senses to learn about growth and change and flowers and herbs. Just for them to understand the big idea of growth and change and to actually be a part of it...I think it’s a wonderful thing. They really get excited about the garden. The benefit is all around.”

Lashinger also stresses that the garden is not just for students. “We are not only educating the children, we are educating the parents, as well. The garden is for the community at large. One of the reasons we have the water-wise garden and label everything is so that people can take that home with them. That’s part of the education, too.” Corbett also noted that, “It has a synergistic effect that helps the whole community.”

Both Lashinger and Corbett report that Mattey’s Garden has received attention from other school districts, as well as other states. “I get contacted periodically for information and people will come and tour, and they’ll get excited,” Lashinger said. “After all, that’s how we got started. It’s all about inspiration and starting the next generation of children’s gardens.”

Mattey’s Garden will celebrate its 13th anniversary this spring.