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Isobel McConnell poses with the giant cabbage her brother, Callum, grew as part of a contest that Western Coventry Elementary students participated in over the summer.

Cov. has its own cabbage patch kid

JESSICA SELBY

jselby@ricentral.com

COVENTRY — Third-grade students at Western Coventry Elementary School did some growing last year. They grew giant cabbages.

In fact, one participant, Callum McConnell, now a fourth-grader at the school, learned his cabbage was the largest grown in the state. Not only did he earn the stature that came with that accomplishment, he also won a \$1,000 scholarship for his efforts.

It was all part of a contest run through Bonnie Plants that teacher Erin Matheu said she learned about solely through coincidence.

“My husband is a vendor for Scott’s Lawn Care, so, one day while he was working at the Home Depot here in Coventry, he got to talking with this man who stopped at the store,” Matheu said. “The man told my husband about this giant cabbage growing program he runs through his work at Bonnie Plants and about how he was looking for a third-grade class in Rhode Island to participate.

“Well, of course, my husband told him that I was a school teacher and that I would probably be interested so they exchanged numbers and that is how the whole thing got started here at our school,” she said. “It was all very coincidental.”

Matheu said she provided the man’s telephone number to school principal Jan Sullivan and Sullivan then forwarded the information to the third-grade teachers to see if they wanted to participate. Of course, they did, she said.



Jessica Selby • Daily Times

Western Coventry Elementary School fourth-grader Callum McConnell earned a \$1,000 for growing a giant cabbage in a contest put on by the school.

Once the agreement was made, Matthew Contreras, the man who runs the contest, traveled all the way to Western Coventry School from Madison, Ala., where he lives, with a truckload of giant cabbage seedlings.

Joyce Martinelli, one of the third-grade teachers who ran the program with her students last year, was there with her students to accept the seedlings.

Martinelli said each of the students was provided with the necessary information needed for growing and caring for the cabbages. They were then sent home with the information and the seedlings to grow them on their own as a project over the summer.

According to Martinelli, the program was intended to be a summer project that would carry the student's lessons from their third-grade curriculum through the summer months.

"As part of the third-grade curriculum, we grow green beans in class," Martinelli said. "And we learn about the life cycle of plants and animals, so this program fit perfectly into our curriculum, but we were only able to participate because Bonnie Plants gave us the seedlings. Had we had to pay for the seedlings, we never would have been able to do it because the school just couldn't have afforded to buy that many giant cabbage seedlings."

Martinelli said about 75 students received cabbages.

When the third graders returned to school in the fall, they reported their progress to their fourth-grade teachers. The majority of the 75 students said they planted their cabbages in the ground at their homes,

Martinelli said. Many of them were successful at growing giant cabbages, she said, but none more so than McConnell.

By the end of the summer months, McConnell said, his cabbage had grown to weigh 13 pounds 2 ounces. Growing the cabbage wasn't hard, he said.

"I had never grown one before, but it was very easy," McConnell's mother, Valerie, said. "I just put it in my vegetable patch where I have all of my other vegetables and we just fed it and it grew and grew."

Callum McConnell said he did have to water the cabbage a lot and "flick bugs off it" regularly, but, other than that, it was not a difficult task.

It was weighing the cabbage that became the real challenge, they said.

According to the McConnells, the cabbage grew so large they didn't know how to weigh it at first. They ended up using Mr. McConnell's fishing weigher, a large hook that hangs acting as a scale, Valerie McConnell said. They bundled the cabbage in a cloth sack, hung it from the hook and then took a weight measurement that way, she said.

When the scale read 13 pounds 2 ounces, both Valerie and Callum said, they were surprised.

"We knew it was heavy just from trying to pick it up, but I had never grown one so I really didn't know how big it could get," Valerie said. "Callum was very good about taking care of it, though. He was very concerned that the bugs would eat it — we did have a

problem with caterpillars and things getting onto it — but he stayed right on top of it and it just kept getting bigger by the day."

Callum said he could see the cabbage from his kitchen window and would check on it regularly each day until they finally decided to weigh it.

Now with the title of Giant Cabbage grower for the state, the McConnells said they are proud, but Valerie McConnell said she is even more pleased about the \$1,000 scholarship.

"We haven't got a college fund for Callum yet so this was a wonderful starting point," she said. "He loves horses, so, one day, I think he wants to do something equestrian.

"Winning the money to start his college fund was such fun and so easy to do, I definitely think that we would do it again if the school offered it," she said.

Callum McConnell wasn't the only Western Coventry student achieving success growing giant produce. Fourth-grade student Matthew Buglio grew a giant pumpkin.

Buglio entered his pumpkin, which he grew from a seed, in the school's annual Harvest Festival Giant Pumpkin Contest.

According to Sullivan, Buglio's pumpkin, weighing in at 528 pounds, was by far the largest submitted by a student.

The family had to use a special device to lift and maneuver the very large vegetable, she said.