Cultivating Food, Connecting Minds, and Harvesting Hope

by David J. Ellis and Pia daSilva

STICK A VEGETABLE seed in the soil, water, wait a little while, pick and eat. It's almost that simple, yet despite great advances in agriculture there are people—mostly children—the world over who are malnourished or starving due to environmental, economic, or political factors outside their immediate control. While food is plentiful in our country, many American children don't realize how delicious fresh vegetables are and how important they are in a healthy diet.

The American Horticultural Society (AHS) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) believe children can be part of the solution to both problems. Along with several other partners, AHS and FAO have launched The Growing Connection, a project designed to teach children around the world about the science behind growing food plants. Ten schools in the United States and ten schools in the West African nation Ghana will be the first growing connection. The schools will be linked through state-of-the-art information technology so that child to child, child to scientist, and teacher to teacher exchanges of information will be possible.

"This project will open literally thousands of windows from this country to the world," says Bob Patterson, FAO's senior liason officer in Washington, D.C. "For us to partner with AHS, an organization that reaches so many gardeners, is a natural."

Felder Rushing, a Mississippi-based garden writer and member of the AHS Board of Directors, recently traveled to Ghana to visit the schools that will be participating in The Growing Connection. "The people I met are very excited about this program," says Rushing. "Whether in Ghana or the United States, students will be able to study science and grow food on a level playing field."

The Growing Connection has generated so much interest already that an early phase of the program has been developed to allow more schools and community youth groups in America and abroad to join in the fun this year. Participants in this early phase of the program will be encouraged to share their learning experiences through the AHS Web site, and the results will be used to guide development of the formal curriculum for The Growing Connection.

Middle school students in Ghana gather around pepper plants growing in an EarthBox™.

COURTESY OF FELDER RUSHING

HIGH ADVENTURE FOR SEEDS

The Growing Connection will be, literally, launched this summer when a giant National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) science balloon carries thousands of packages of vegetable seeds to an altitude of 120,000 feet in the stratosphere.

After returning to Earth, the seeds from the balloon will be distributed, along with packages of "control" seeds that were not sent up in the balloon. Participants will conduct experiments on how solar radiation, cold temperatures, and differential gravity affect plant growth.

To ensure the experiments are consistent no matter where they are done, each participant will also receive The Growing Connection Kit. Each kit contains a specialized, self-contained growing unit called an EarthBox™ (see box), seeds, and project sheets describing how to grow and experiment with the plants.

The seeds chosen for the project include five different kinds of sunflowers as well as tomatoes, eggplants, lettuces, and peppers. "Sunflowers play a special role in The Growing Connection," says AHS President Emeritus Dr. H. Marc Cathey, "because they are used for their food value and also to produce oil, they have tremendous genetic diversity, they are native to

North America, and their beautiful flowers bring joy to anyone who grows them."

GETTING INVOLVED

For now, schools and community youth groups are encouraged to participate in the first phase of the program. To help schools and youth groups that would like to join in, a special program has been set up to allow donations of The Growing Connection Kits (see below for details).

"Growing food is fun and it also teaches us important lessons about nutrition and sustainability," says AHS President Katy Moss Warner. "We are hoping that more than 1,000 schools will get involved in the first phase of The Growing Connection so we can use what they learn to make the program even more exciting."

To learn more about participating in The Growing Connection, call AHS at (800) 777-7931, e-mail: thegrowingconnection@ahs.org, or visit the AHS Web site at *www.ahs.org*.

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KATY MOSS WARNER

Why EarthBox™?

One of the key elements to the success of The Growing Connection program was finding a growing unit that would allow experiments to be conducted in a scientifically consistent framework. The Earth Box™—developed by a unique partnership of a scientist, a farmer, and a plastics manufacturer—was chosen because it is a revolutionary, sustainably designed planter that can be used to grow plants successfully almost anywhere with minimal input of water and fertilizer. In addition, the EarthBox is self-contained, portable, and simple to use.

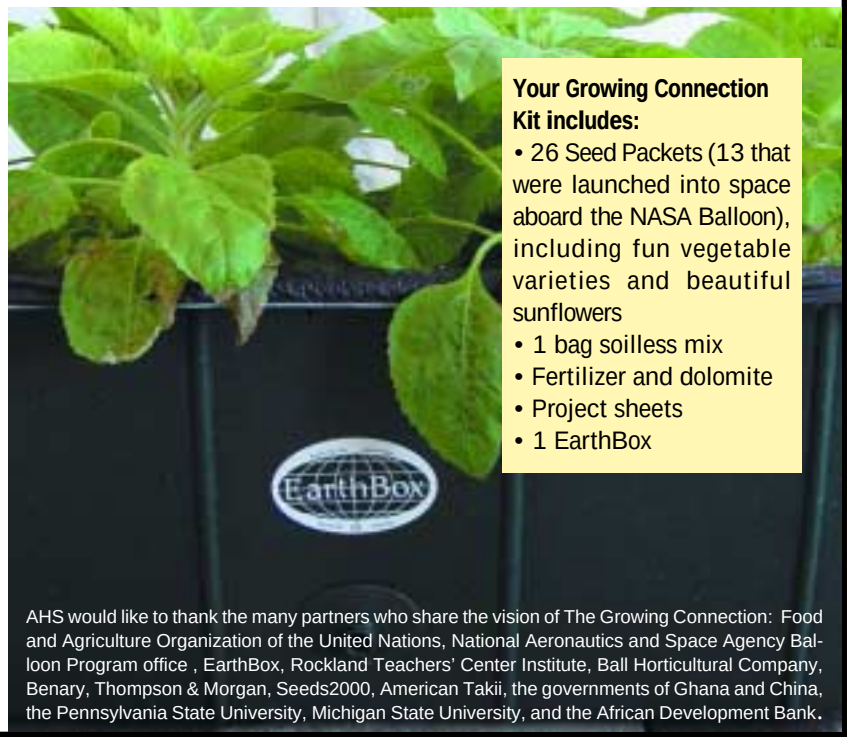
Young tomato plants planted in EarthBoxes thrive at the EarthBox Research Center in Ellerton, Florida. To ensure the success of the project, the company that manufactures EarthBoxes has already donated more than 100 of the planters to program partners for testing in Ghana and in the United States.

share THE GROWING CONNECTION

Buy The Growing Connection Kit for yourself or for the children in your life and one-third of your purchase amount will be donated to AHS for The Growing Connection. The kits purchased with those donations will be passed along to schools or community youth groups who want to join in the learning experience.

The Growing Connection Kit contains everything you need to get started growing these special vegetable seeds, including project sheets that will provide directions for experimenting with the seeds that went up in a NASA science balloon.

Buy one kit for yourself for $59.95 plus $15 shipping and one-third of your purchase will go towards an additional kit for the program. You can also donate your kit to the program or make a tax-deductible gift in any amount. To order, visit the AHS Web site at *www.ahs.org* or call AHS at (800) 777-7931.



Your Growing Connection Kit includes:

- 26 Seed Packets (13 that were launched into space aboard the NASA Balloon), including fun vegetable varieties and beautiful sunflowers
- 1 bag soilless mix
- Fertilizer and dolomite
- Project sheets
- 1 EarthBox

AHS would like to thank the many partners who share the vision of The Growing Connection: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, National Aeronautics and Space Agency Balloon Program office , EarthBox, Rockland Teachers' Center Institute, Ball Horticultural Company, Benary, Thompson & Morgan, Seeds2000, American Takii, the governments of Ghana and China, the Pennsylvania State University, Michigan State University, and the African Development Bank.