



JENNIFER HEBERT

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REALITYWORKS SUCCESS STORY

Salads, Smoothies and Student Engagement: Hydroponics Helping LA Students Grow Healthy Food

When Beau Chene High School Family & Consumer Sciences Teacher Jennifer Hebert opened her brand-new foods textbooks shortly before the 2019-2020 academic year began, she was reminded once again how valuable her newest classroom tool would be.

"Hydroponics Gardening" is the very first chapter in our new 'Guide to Good Foods' textbook," said the Louisiana educator, who acquired a Plant Lab Educational Hydroponics System from Realityworks just a few weeks before her tenth-, eleventh- and twelfth-grade students arrived for the new semester. "Seeing that definition word in a textbook, a textbook that's very new, I knew this would be something the kids have never seen before. They would be amazed."

Hebert's prediction proved correct. Not only did her students react audibly every time a new group entered her classroom that first week of school, but, according to Hebert, the hydroponics system has continued to engage her students as they use it to grow their own vegetables in her food science class.

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Students in Jennifer Hebert's food science class used lettuce grown with her hydroponics unit to make green smoothies and salads.

Hebert acquired her hydroponics system from Realityworks, Inc., after seeing posts about it on social media. One of two units the company offers for hydroponics instruction, the plant lab system features 33 grow sites across three shelves, which are connected to individual water sources for experimentation with plants, water levels and nutrients on each level. The system arrived in late summer nearly fully assembled, making it easy for Hebert to ensure it could be used immediately.

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“Science is not my forte, and calculating pH is something my students have maybe never done,” Hebert said of the step needed to ensure hydroponic crops receive the right nutrients to grow. “But it’s easy! My students monitor water, test the nutrients, test the pH and make adjustments. . . the kids are learning that part of science, as well as just the fact that healthy foods can be grown without soil.”

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when they saw the LED lights on and glowing, so I made sure the lights were on that first day,” said Hebert. “Now, I keep it on so kids can see how it works, how plants are growing, every time they walk in. They think it’s the coolest thing ever.”

The 2018-2019 academic year was the first time Hebert, who has a background in dietetics, taught food science. She recalls struggling to keep her content engaging while incorporating science, and saw hydroponics as a way to do both.

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the fact that healthy foods can be grown without soil.”

Only a month after getting started with her hydroponics system, Hebert’s food science class harvested 33 heads of lettuce. They’ll use the three types of lettuce they grew to

develop salad recipes and dressings, and make their own green smoothies.

“My kids were amazed that lettuce grows in different colors – they thought the red leaves were dead,” said Hebert. “Many of my students know what a salad is, but they don’t know that there are this many different types of lettuce. I’m definitely opening their eyes to the fact that there’s more than just iceberg – there are so many types of good foods you can grow yourself.”

Access to healthy food is another topic Hebert has used her hydroponics system to help illustrate.

“We discuss the fact that some of them live in apartments, or have no yard, or live in a city,” said Hebert. “This is a way to grow healthy food even if you don’t have soil to work with, or if you live where there isn’t good soil.”

Eventually, Hebert sees her students using the system to grow varieties of lettuce they’ve researched themselves and practice the scratch cooking skills they’ll need for her advanced food science class. She hopes to turn the system into an autonomous project, one her students can take on from start to finish, growing food themselves and creating their own recipes.

“If the system wasn’t so easy to use, I wouldn’t recommend it – I was scared at first, but it’s the simplest thing ever,” said Hebert. “For an overwhelmed teacher who has a lot on their plate (and I’ve been teaching for over 16 years, so I have a lot on my plate), this is a great tool – it’s not hard at all.”



Using greens grown in her new hydroponics unit, Jennifer Hebert is teaching her food science students how to incorporate fresh, healthy food into everyday recipes like salads and smoothies.