



Two of Cuba High School agriculture teacher Doug Falk's students are learning and practicing the skills of welding in the wood shop at the school. Falk said master welder Tom Brown of Smithfield has been volunteering to help the students and has taken them to competitions for 10 years.

Falk's career was all about growing knowledge

By JOHN FROEHLING
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There's much to do, learn and enjoy in Doug Falk's agriculture class at Cuba High School. His students germinate plants and plant a garden, drive tractors and plant crops, take experiential field trips and more. Falk will retire at the end of this school year, so he just has a couple of months to go.

"I like hands-on. I could lecture every day, but it's a lot more fun to get out and do things," Falk said. "I found it to be a great way for kids to learn, and teach."

In the dead of winter, students germinate seeds in a fully functional greenhouse built in 2004 at the high school. It is 30 feet by 60 feet, equipped with cooling fans and a sprinkler system, and one end opens for maximum air flow. There also are benches.

It's a great place for kids to learn about horticulture. The seeds sprout into tomato and pepper plants, bedding plants like geraniums and marigolds, as well as various kinds of herbs.

The students transplant them in the spring in a garden on the school grounds.

"The class takes care of it all," Falk said. "So much is online. All I want to do is introduce those areas. I've got kids that love the greenhouse."

He said the Cuba FFA Chapter farms 200 acres. The school district owns seven acres and leases the rest from Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, formerly and more commonly known as MSD. "They're very good landlords and work with us," Falk said.

The FFA students grow corn and soybeans on that land, he noted.

Many students in his agriculture class have a background in farming or grew up on a farm. They already are familiar with getting farm equipment ready for a new year and growing crops, he noted.

"In the spring it really takes a lot of time. The kids do a lot of it. They drive tractors and make repairs. I'm out there with them, but they do a lot of that stuff," Falk said.

"We end each year with a retail garden center experience," he said. It gives the kids some experience in marketing and customer service. They advertise in local newspapers and on Facebook, plus they put up posters around town.

"We have a customer base as well - parents and friends," Falk said. "They go out and take the order."

They sell different varieties of tomato plants, like Roma for canning and sauces, Better Boy and Early Girl which slice to nice sizes for sandwiches, as well as different kinds of cherry tomatoes. They also sell other vegetables.

Falk said in addition to growing plants in soil, they have a large hydroponics unit used to grow lettuce and tomatoes. "There's no soil, but it has fertilizer in it. It's all a done with pure water. It's a water culture," he said.

"You just have to do it. Sometimes you fail. Everything is done to make kids aware," Falk said.

He added the produce is just as tasty as fresh from the garden. Getting the right varieties is a key to that. Locally grown food usually tastes better since it is not picked green for shipment to stores, he said.

"It's all about showing the kids: This is what you can do with it."

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