

## Schechter's Biblical Garden cultivates Jewish awareness

by [Jill Garbi](#)

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Under sunny skies, the Biblical Garden at Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Monmouth County buzzed with life. An orange butterfly fluttered on a fig leaf, while swarms of bees burrowed deep into the succulent purple flesh of overripe figs.

The new garden is a school-wide project designed to integrate Jewish and environmental studies, said Linda Glickstein, director of admissions and marketing for the Marlboro school.

“Our goal is to produce a Bible-themed garden that will represent the Jewish holiday cycle and include plants that are mentioned in the Torah,” she said. “By creating the garden the students will experience firsthand that they are empowered to make a difference, and can lead their generation into the future.”

While the climate and space limitations prevent the school from growing the “Seven Species” mentioned in *Deuteronomy* 8:8, the gardeners aim to harvest as many of the seven as possible, while saving space for other symbolic foods and those that are used in rituals, Glickstein said.

Two beds of potatoes, planted this past spring, will produce about 50 pounds of the tuber to be used by students to make Hanukka latkes. Some of the figs growing in the garden will be dried in the school's



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Solomon Schechter Day School seventh-graders (with Jewish studies teacher Mati David, holding fig in center) enjoy the fruits of their labors in the school's Biblical Garden.

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**The Seven Species**

solar oven — similar to technology used in Israel — to be enjoyed on Tu B'Shevat — the New Year of the Trees, when it is customary to eat all the Seven Species.

Soon, students will gather to plant two dwarf apple trees so a future harvest will yield the fruit traditionally eaten on Rosh Hashana, as well as grapes for the “fruit of the vine,” a bed of “*na'na*” or mint, horseradish to be used as bitter herbs at the Passover seder, and wheat to symbolize the Shavuot sheaves.

The Seven Species (*Shiv'at Haminim*) are agricultural products mentioned in *Deuteronomy* 8:8, which says that Israel was “a land of wheat, barley, grapevines, figs, and pomegranates; a land of olives and date honey.”

The seven species were important in ancient times because one of the tithes — the *bikkurim*, or “first fruits” — given at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem derived from these seven foods.

### **Environmental *tikun olam***

“The students are learning about the Jewish connection to the earth and how to maximize the conditions we have to work within,” said science teacher (and part-time organic farmer) Bill McCurdy, who is supervising the project. “The garden is planted along the school’s southern-facing wall, and the blacktop absorbs heat, which re-radiates up into the cool atmosphere at night, creating a microclimate around the garden,” he said.

That microclimate protects the garden and speeds its growth. Its Mission fig tree towers at 12 feet, and produces up to 30 pounds of figs each year.

For the students, the garden is a hands-on tool bringing their studies to life, said Judaic studies teacher Mati David. Each year, the Schechter sixth-graders spend four days at the Teva Learning Center, a Jewish environmental institute in Connecticut. The school’s seventh graders work with Sviva Israel’s Eco Connection on a joint project of environmental *tikun olam*.

“Then, in the eighth grade, they go on a trip to Israel, where it all ties together,” David said. “By the time they graduate, Schechter students are fluent in environmental Hebrew — words like reuse, recycle, reduce, rethink.”

For seventh-grader Seth Wisniewski of Manalapan, the raking, digging, and planting have a long-term payoff. “It gives me a good feeling to know that when I graduate the vegetables and fruits I helped plant will keep on giving back to the younger kids,” he said.

His classmate, Sawyer Malkin of Freehold, said he enjoys working as a team with his whole class. “Plus it’s good to know that we will save money for the school by making our own foods that symbolize the holidays,” he said.

Seventh-grader Ariel Jacobs of Ocean said she enjoys taking the classroom outside. “I love being one with the environment, and I look forward to making latkes with our own homegrown potatoes,” she said.

For Skylar Eber of Lakewood, also in the seventh grade, being connected to the earth makes her more aware and open-minded. “When I see fruits and vegetables in the supermarket that I’ve never seen before, I always ask my mom if I can try it. That’s how my love affair with guava started,” she said. “One of the mitzvot is to be keepers of the earth. It’s our world and we need to protect and guide it the right way.”

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