Gasps erupted when nutrition education volunteer Lynette Patterson uncovered a cart Thursday afternoon, revealing a plump, electric-green fruit.

_"Watermelon!_ students whispered excitedly, recognizing the fruit immediately as something they’d been enjoying all summer.

But what students of Olivia Variel’s fourth-grade class didn’t realize was that the benefits of the fruit didn’t end at its crisp, delicious flavor.

_"I like to start with watermelon to get them trusting the fruit, and then we can build from there," said Patterson, a volunteer from the Oregon State University extension program who has taught nutrition education in schools for 25 years, and has been teaching nutrition in Central Oregon classrooms over the past year._ We have the opportunity to go in and provide kids with information and encourage them to make healthy choices.

Though it’s not quite watermelon season anymore, Variel’s students at Elk Meadow Elementary School in Bend learned all about the summer fruit during Thursday’s session _including what it adds to their diets._

_"I like that it’s healthy, and that it tastes good," said Sienna Bales, 9. "It’s fun to learn about how much vitamins it has, and how it’s healthy for you._

**Program teaches value of being healthy**

The Oregon State University Extension’s nutrition education program is designed to teach students about the importance of being healthy through a series of classes.

The classes focus on the basics of staying healthy, including segments on fruits and vegetables, hand washing and physical activity.

The session started Thursday with students pulling out their nutrition folders, which they had received the week before during the first health session.

Patterson placed a transparency on the overhead projector, showing a colorful wheel of fruits and vegetables, and asked the students to describe what they saw.

_"It’s a rainbow of fruit," said one student. Patterson nodded, adding that rainbows have a variety of colors _and that the word _variety_ is key when it comes to a healthy and balanced diet._

_"Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables," said Patterson, having students transfer the words to a nutrition worksheet._

While the fourth-graders were busy carefully spelling out the words, Patterson uncovered her cart, bringing out a medium-sized watermelon.

_"Watermelon is my favorite," said Cameron Greener, 9, eyeing the electric green fruit. "I like it because it’s really juicy and good for you._
Choosing quality fruit

Patterson then launched into a discussion about how to choose a ripe watermelon, making sure to observe the color, the weight and the sound the fruit makes when you knock on it.

"It sounds hollow," said Eric Woodall, 9, curling his hand into a fist and rapping on the melon. Patterson went on to say that a hollow sound was a sign of a good watermelon, along with the bright green color, and a spot of yellow on the fruit's bottom where it would have been lying in the garden.

Students then pulled out a nutrition wheel, in which they were able to see the nutritional benefits of the watermelon, including a healthy helping of vitamins A and C.

These are essential vitamins, Patterson pointed out, for keeping eyes, skin, gums and the immune system healthy.

After, Patterson unveiled a buffet of chopped watermelon, bananas, blueberries and vanilla yogurt, showing students how to build a banana split using healthier ingredients than ice cream and chocolate syrup.

Eric, who was first in line to make his split, said he enjoyed the fresh fruit mix so much he wants to have it in lieu of cake for his birthday this January, even though it may be tricky to find watermelon in the heart of winter.

Fun break from 3 R's

"I finished it pretty quickly," said Eric, adding that he liked learning about the fruit. "It's kind of fun getting away from math and science and stuff."

This is the second year that Elk Meadow Elementary has had the nutrition program. With many of her students coming from a low socioeconomic background, Variel said sometimes health and nutrition are not topics discussed at home.

"Every time Lynette comes in, we notice the kids start choosing more vegetables and fruits in the cafeteria," said Variel, saying students have started trying once-unpopular veggies like green peppers at lunchtime. "Instead of bypassing them like usual, they pick them because they remember trying them and liking them in class."

The session ended Thursday with a short stint of exercise, students stretching, doing jumping jacks, and running in place. They waved goodbye to Patterson as she wheeled out her cart, knowing that she'd be back for another session the following week.

"They can take back what they've learned here and share it with their families," said Patterson. "I really believe they can influence what happens at home."

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