



Westhill nurtures menu of the future
By Wynne ParryStaff Writer
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STAMFORD - When it came time to find fish to raise in Westhill High School's agricultural science building, Program Coordinator Matthew Lisy knew exactly what species he wanted.

Nile tilapia are a freshwater fish cultivated since ancient Egypt. In 2004, they became the eighth most popular seafood in the United States, according to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations.

To Lisy, who has a doctorate in ichthyology - the study of fish - tilapia are the future. One day the mild, flaky fish will rival hamburgers and hot dogs as common American fare, Lisy likes to say. In his second year as program coordinator at Westhill, he hopes to establish a tilapia breeding program for food and for supplying other agricultural programs in Connecticut.

As promising as the fish may be, they were difficult to find. Lisy tried other agricultural science programs in the state but ended up ordering them from the State University of New York in Cobleskill.

Dec. 8 was a graduation day of sorts for the 500 fish, now a few inches long. Since arriving in October, they had grown enough for students to scoop them out of two rectangular nursery tanks and sort them by size, using a device with adjustable bars, into a series of round 400-gallon tanks. Separating the fish stops the big ones from hogging the food and eating the smaller ones. "We don't want the food chain. We want to be feeding everybody," Lisy told students as they chased fish with nets.

By the end of the year, the fish should be ready to breed, so Lisy plans to separate them into harems - one male to four or so females. They are mouth brooders, meaning the female incubates the eggs and shelters the young fish in her mouth. By fall, the older fish should be ready to eat, Lisy said. The tilapia have taken over more than just their tanks - Lisy recently arranged to keep the room at 80 degrees, a more economical solution than heating each tank individually, he said. For the students, five of whom are enrolled in the aquaculture course, the fish are a first. "When I came here as a freshman, there was no aquaculture program," said senior Doug Bocchetta. "There were fish tanks scattered around the building that some kids worked on, but there was no room like this."

Stamford's agriscience program, established in 1976, is one of 19 in the state. In 2003, the new agriscience building opened, equipped for plant, animal and environmental science, agricultural mechanics, and an aquaculture program to raise fish. But when Lisy arrived two years ago as a science teacher, he found empty tanks stacked to the ceiling and filled with junk, and mold on the floor.

After two teachers in the program left, he was the only applicant to run it, Lisy said. He enlisted students to help him install new pipes and get the tanks and filtration systems running.

This year, 66 students, some from outside Stamford, are enrolled in the agriscience program. Outside school districts pay to transport their students to Stamford. Last year's recruitment efforts have appeared to pay off, because the program added a second freshman class this year.

Most students said an interest in veterinary work attracted them to Westhill's program, where they can also learn about floral design, dog grooming, landscaping and other subjects.

Lisy brings particular energy to aquaculture because of his background, which includes a doctorate in ecology from Pennsylvania State University in 2006. He is awaiting the publication of his research, in which he identified six new species of fish, plus a new genus, from Lake Malawi in Africa.

Students complete independent projects on topics that have included building a miniature railroad and creating flammable pine cones for holiday fires.

Claire Lyons, a senior who would like to be a horse veterinarian, helped organize the floral design room, which was being used for storage. By contacting wholesalers, she was able to make the calla lily arrangements for her parents' 25th anniversary party at cost, Lyons said.

"Everyone at my parent's party could not believe I was in charge of the floral arrangements," she said. "It was kind of a big deal."

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