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JOHN ZIOMEK/Courier-Post

Students at James Johnson Elementary School examine local produce brought to the Cherry Hill school by J. Ambrogi Foods Thursday. The school district is celebrating Harvest Week as part of a Farm to School initiative.

Interest in S.J. agriculture grows in Cherry Hill school

By **BARBARA S. ROTHCHILD**
Courier-Post Staff

CHERRY HILL

Students at James Johnson Elementary School got a special treat at lunchtime Thursday. It was way too cool and rainy for a field trip, but there was no need to go out. Instead, Jersey farms came to them.

Farmer John — Cherry Hill resident John Hayden, who works for Thorofare produce distributor J. Ambrogi Foods — set up a cart of seasonal Jersey Fresh fruits and vegetables reminiscent of the carts used by company founder Narcissa Ambrogi 125 years ago.

"Thanksgiving is coming up and cranberries are a big crop this year. The No. 1 cranberry crop in the United States is coming from New Jersey," he told the youngsters as he held up samples gathered from Hammonton bogs.



JOHN ZIOMEK/Courier-Post

Cherry Hill resident John Hayden — as Farmer John — leads a discussion of South Jersey produce brought to the James Johnson Elementary School Thursday.

"Did you know that sweet potatoes aren't really potatoes? It's a vine called morning glory," he added.

"Sweet potatoes are as

old as the dinosaurs. During the Jurassic period, sweet potatoes were there for herbivore dinosaurs to eat. They're rich in Vitamin C and pro-

tein," Hayden said.

Locally grown, pale yellow sweet potatoes are a small but tasty crop in

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the Garden State, New Jersey Department of Agriculture spokesman William Walker said. The Burlington Township resident accompanied Farmer John and helped pass out juicy red apples, tart Granny Smith apples and sweet Seckel dwarf pears from Monroeville.

"We're trying to help you guys have healthier

foods and help me keep farmers in business. It's a hard time to make a living as a farmer, but farmers can provide you with food and fun," said Walker, who advised the students to visit local farms to pick pumpkins and take hayrides.

The visit to Johnson School, along with one to Stockton Elementary School on Wednesday, were the first farm-to-

school visits during the district's Harvest Week.

Harvest Week is a new feature of the Farm to School initiative that the district conducts with Aramark, its food-service provider, and Ambrogi Foods.

The farm visits will continue during the 2010-2011 school year. Johnson School Principal Karen Rockhill jumped at the chance for her school

to be a stop this autumn.

"It's a very exciting program. It's making the children more informed consumers," Rockhill said.

Aramark spokesman Eric Colebaugh said school trays will be stocked with local produce as long as it's available. During this season, Ambrogi is supplied by 19 local farms, with the number going up in late spring

and summer.

The Farm to School initiative was suggested by a task force made up of parents and representatives from the district and Aramark.

Students were enjoying the visit — and the produce.

"I knew apples were healthy for you. They're sweet and sour," fourth-grader Crisandi Howe, 9, said.

Her classmate, Karl Jackson, 9, was devouring a Granny Smith specimen.

"Mostly, I eat an apple a day and I don't eat a lot of candy," he said.

Added fourth-grader Joana Morales, 10, "I liked that we learned where these things come from, a farm."

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