

White House Garden Offers Teaching Moment for Agriculture

By John Hart

On the first day of spring, which was also National Agriculture Day, first lady Michelle Obama, with the help of local elementary school students, broke ground for a fruit and vegetable garden on the south lawn of the White House. The 1,100-square-foot garden will provide as many as 55 different fruits and vegetables for use in the White House kitchen. Some of the produce will be donated to a nearby soup kitchen.

The new garden—the first of its kind since Eleanor Roosevelt planted a victory garden during World War II—made headlines and brought some positive news and brightness to a nation that has been inundated by negative economic news. Planting a garden in springtime means new life, growth and hope, something America’s farmers certainly understand, since they devote their lives to carefully growing crops and raising livestock.

For American agriculture, the new White House garden offers a great teaching moment. Farm Bureau sees the garden as just one more way to engage the public about what goes into producing food. American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman is hopeful that other families across our nation will join the Obama family and plant their own gardens this spring.

“It’s a great way to discover what it takes to produce food and learn about the growing cycle, from preparing the seed to tending the weeds and pests, and with hard work, a bountiful harvest,” Stallman, a Texas rice farmer and cattle producer, said this week. “Home gardens are a great way to complement production agriculture that Farm Bureau members devote their lives to.”

In that statement, the AFBF president chose a key word: “complement.” Home gardens are great for providing fruits and vegetables for family meals, but no one expects these gardens to displace the bounty brought forth by America’s hard-working farm and ranch families. Modern production agriculture in the United States is an undisputed marvel in feeding a hungry planet.

The White House garden rekindles a whisper of the agrarian spirit that built our nation. Gardens, and the dirt-under-the-fingernails work that goes with them, instill a degree of appreciation of what it takes to put food on the table. The first family, the White House staff and the school children who will help tend the garden throughout the year are indeed leading by example.

More than 98 percent of our nation’s farms and ranches are owned and operated by individuals or families, and those farm and ranch families appreciate the first family’s nod to food production.

While gardens have always been a traditional part of life for farm families, they also know that the productive farms they own and operate remain critical to the strength of our nation.

Whether it is bread on the White House table, made from Kansas wheat, orange juice from a Florida citrus grove, baked potatoes from the rich soils of Idaho or rice from the lush fields of Arkansas, professional farmers fortify the nutritional needs of our nation.

In other words, it takes all of America’s farm and ranch families to feed this nation and much of the world. Today, each American farmer feeds an average 143 people, compared to just 19 people in 1940. Thanks to modern technology and state-of-the art production practices, American farmers are the world’s most productive.

And without a doubt, the vast majority of America’s hard working family farmers welcome a new garden on the south lawn of the White House as just one more way to tell the story of America’s amazing, miraculous food production system. It becomes easier to take in that big picture after you have had a little dirt under your fingernails.