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Science students help develop 'space garden'

By Arrin Newton Brunson
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HYDE PARK - An experiment in Jason Oliverson's sixth-grade science class has all the elements of gardens he has tended at home - seeds, soil, water, air and light.

Yet, Jason says, the peas sprouting in a plant-growth chamber at Cedar Ridge Middle School in Hyde Park could just as easily blossom inside his house - or in outer space.

Jason and 220 other sixth-graders, under the tutelage of educator Larry Grunig, have joined seven other student groups throughout the United States - from Alaska to Florida - and even Russia in an "out of this world" space-garden experiment.

The Micro-Lada outreach program is a classroom version of a vegetation chamber - created by USU students at the Space Dynamics Laboratory (SDL) in partnership with the Russian Institute of Biomedical Problems - for use by astronauts and cosmonauts during long flights on the International Space Station.

Erin Pitcher of Hyde Park and Grant Vernier of North Logan are among students at Cedar Ridge Middle School in Hyde Park who are closely watching the progress of pea plants developing in a mini "space garden." (Arrin Newton Brunson)

As the pea plants in Grunig's class grow, his students chart the progress and compare their data to data obtained by colleagues far away.

"Our goal is to bridge international borders and help students realize that science is an important element all over the world," said SDL spokeswoman Gayle Bowen.

Ryan Bohm, a USU senior engineering student, said the youngsters also are in contact with a cosmonaut in space, who is monitoring a Lada experiment.

Each participating classroom is furnished with a Micro-Lada kit, which includes a reusable case, vegetation tray, soil substrate (almost identical to the substrate used in Lada, but with added fertilizer), a packet of peas, a grow light and reflector, setup instructions and software for recording growth data.

abrunson@sltrib.com