

SHENANDOAH MIDDLE SCHOOL

PLANT FROM THE PAST

STUDENTS DRAWN TO THE HISTORY OF THE COONTIE PLANT FINALLY GOT A GLIMPSE OF IT LAST WEEK WHEN IT WAS PLANTED IN THEIR SCHOOL'S GARDEN

BY MARIA CHERCOLES

mchercoles@MiamiHerald.com

For four months, students at Shenandoah Middle School were on a hunt — for a coontie plant.

Once a source of food for the Arawak, Calusa and Tequesta tribes and later a symptom-reliever for soldiers gassed during World War I, the coontie is now scarce in South Florida.

But after learning about the plant also known as *zamila pumila*, the middle-schoolers were intent on bringing a specimen to their school at 1950 SW 19th St. And they did, last week, during a formal planting ceremony at the school's garden.

"We heard the plant has a lot of history, so we thought it should still be part of history by bringing it back to the area," seventh-grader Pedro Peñate said.

The students, who are part of the school's Museum Magnet program, first heard of the coontie on a city tour with the Dade Heritage Trust.

A poisonous cycad with narrow dark green leaves and brown cone-shaped flowers, it was used by native tribes to make a low-protein starch. After it was treated to remove the poison, the starch was made into bread and cakes.

"Compie, comptie, coontie, cooti — you find the name spelled in different ways because the Indians are the ones who gave it the name, which is translated as arrow-root," said Ruth Jacobs, the Dade Heritage Trust's education chairwoman.

When pioneers arrived in South Florida, the Seminoles taught them the cleaning process. By the 1840s, coonties were grown for commercial purposes by the Ferguson brothers, who operated the largest plantation at the head of the Miami River, and sold coontie flour by the barrel to the Keys, said South Florida historian Paul George.

But after the 1860s the brothers sold their plantation and the coontie plant was forgotten until World War I, when a French soldier intoxicated with mustard gas was soothed by a coontie cookie. Until the end of the war, barrels of coontie flour were shipped to Europe. When the war ended, coontie production slowed, George said.

The coontie's history interested the students, said Magnet League Teacher Maria Jimenez.

Weeks later, the students went to the Historical Museum of Southern Florida and heard about the coontie



CODDLED COONTIE:

Shenandoah Middle School students Michelle Romero, Stephanie Gonzalez, Julio Parada and Natalia Rave carefully tamp soil around one of five coontie plants their class planted in the school's garden.

HECTOR GABINO
EL NUEVO HERALD

again. They immediately asked their teachers to bring the plant to school, said Jimenez.

The Dade Heritage Trust and the Historical Museum of Southern Florida worked together to find a specimen for the school. It took several calls before one was finally found at Diaz Nursery, 6291 SW 127th Ave., Jacobs said.

"We never thought it would be so difficult to find the plant," Jimenez said.

After the museums were able to locate five specimens, students in several seventh-grade classes were asked to contribute \$1.50 each to pay for them.

Then last week, after waiting so long, students saw the coontie for the first time.

Laughing, whispering and unable to contain their excitement, Shenandoah students dug the five holes where the coonties would be planted.

"Although I got a little dirty, I'm glad I can finally see the plant," said student Michelle Romero, who poured soil to cover the holes after the coonties were in.

Coontie is beginning to make a comeback in landscaping because of a curious relationship it has with the Atala butterfly, which lays eggs on the coontie because the plant's poison keeps insects from eating the larvae.

"The coontie plant is literally a butterfly trap," said Franck Schena, the historical museum's education outreach coordinator.

Although coontie starch has so many uses, it is not cost effective. The plant must be 20 years old before it can be used for starch.

"In 20 years, when the kids have their school reunion, they can make flour," Jacobs said.

This is Shenandoah Middle School's third year as a Museum Magnet, which means it uses a federal grant to combine classroom education and museum visits.

Students will now have to work on a project about the coontie and study its economic and environmental history, said Jimenez.

"The plants will be here as long as the school is here, hopefully forever," Peñate said.