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Judson Middle School teacher William Russell shows the plaque he was awarded for being an outstanding science teacher.

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Uses Garden of Understanding for hands-on learning

By **EDUARDO VENTO**

Staff writer

Vegetables really don't come from the grocery store.

That's just one of the many revelations students at Judson Middle School have after taking William Russell's science class.

"I have a lot of students from rural areas, but I also have some who aren't familiar with gardening. I had one girl tell me she wasn't going to eat the potato because she saw her fellow classmates pick it right out of the ground," Russell said.

Russell has a lot to smile about these days. He enjoys giving his students hands-on experience in a makeshift garden at the school.

He also recently got married. He has a new 6-month-old daughter, and he's just received the Outstanding Science Teacher award from the Science Teachers Association of Texas.

The group recognized Russell at a conference at Texas A&M University two weeks ago. Russell received a plaque from the association and a \$200 honorarium.

"It really came as a surprise, but it's an honor to be recognized. It's very rewarding," he said. "It's kind of nice when all your hard work pays off in this way. But I didn't do it all by myself. This was a team effort with the other teachers here who mentored me."

Russell has been teaching seventh- and eighth-grade science at Judson Middle school for nine years. He is a graduate of Stephen F. Austin State University, where he is pursuing a master's degree in science education.

Although Russell used his degree to become a drilling technician right of college, teaching has always been in his blood.

"I just enjoy teaching. I couldn't see myself do anything else right now," said Russell, who himself attended Judson Middle School as a young boy.

One of the ways Russell accomplishes that goal is through his Garden of Understanding — a project that had "meek" beginnings in a classroom windowsill more than seven years ago and has now flourished into a large outdoor science lab.

"I want kids to take away from this class a love of learning. I want them to understand that learning how the world works isn't work at all."

Russell said the students do all the work in the garden, from tilling the land to planting the

seeds to picking the vegetables. And there are lots of those.

Among other "healthy" foods the middle school grows: tomatoes, beans, corn, squash and potatoes. The students closely monitor the project by mapping the garden, measuring the growth, collecting weather data and graphing the information.

"This gets them out of this box," Russell said, referring to the classroom. "They get to work with their hands and watch a full (plant) life cycle. The kids just love it, and the garden has gotten bigger and bigger every year."

The Garden of Understanding project was a major part of Russell's application to the Science Teachers Association. He included his students' essays and photos of their work in the garden.

But probably the best part for the students is getting the chance to taste some of their own work. Every spring, Russell said the classes cook their vegetables and have a big feast.

Russell said he hopes to expand the garden further this year by adding a butterfly habitat.

"We want to put plants in there that will provide nectar

and a food source for larvae so we can get caterpillars to use in class," Russell said.

Russell believes the hands-on activities at Judson are invaluable to the students.

"Although we've always scored high in the district, we had a 99-percent mastery on the eighth-grade science test last year," Russell said, referring to the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills.

"It's a team effort. The sixth-grade teachers contribute. The seventh-grade teachers contribute. I'm just lucky I get to be a part of the team. The other teachers who have been here longer than I have, have taught and guided me."

Russell hopes to do the same for his students in the world of science, a subject he's been interested in since he was a boy.

"I've fallen in love with earth science," Russell said. "I've collected rocks for as long as I can remember. Each one is like a book. Each rock has its own story to tell. A lot of the spring activities we do here revolve around environmental issues because I want my students to be good stewards of the land. I want them to see how life is tied together."