TWO OLD POTATOES
AND ME

Author: John Coy
Illustrator: Carolyn Fisher
Publisher: Alfred A. Knopf

THEME:

Just because something is old or meant for another use doesn’t mean it lacks value—a little science or a little art can give all sorts of objects new life.

PROGRAM SUMMARY:

After a young girl finds two old potatoes at her father’s house, they plant and tend them to see if they will have new potatoes in September.

LeVar and his daughter Michaela welcome us to their kitchen as they explore how kitchen waste can actually be re-used to help their garden grow. Then it’s off to visit artists who take cast offs and turn them into something beautiful and useful, and to a manufacturing plant to watch the a-maize-ing feat of turning corn into something totally unexpected!

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

Before viewing the program, pose the question: “How can something that is old become new?” Encourage students to think of a variety of possibilities, using creativity and imagination.

Invite students to share any experiences they have had with gardening.

Explore the concept of “reuse” from the environmental phrase “reduce, reuse, recycle.” Discuss how a variety of items can be reused, such as clothing, toys, paper, containers, etc.

The girl in the story has found a new project that she can enjoy with her father. Discuss with students activities they like to do with their parents individually.

Ask students to name books that they have read (or heard) more than once. Discuss books as “old friends” and why we enjoy revisiting them.

CURRICULUM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

Have students research the role of earthworms in the decomposition process and make a mural illustrating their findings. Their mural should show earthworms and decomposing matter above ground and a cutaway view underground. Students should label the mural with words and descriptions.

Obtain some potatoes that have started to shrivel with eyes that are growing roots. Cut away the eye portions and have students plant them. (Use deep rather than shallow containers to allow maximum opportunity for root development.) Divide the class into small groups making each group responsible for a container of potato plants. Have students keep an observation journal of the plant growth, recording notes and sketches. It is likely that not all of the potato eyes will grow into plants. Have students investigate the soil around the planting to discover why it didn’t grow (some will decompose) and discuss their findings in relation to the study of decomposition.

Use the remaining portions of the “old” potatoes to make potato prints. The following materials are needed for this project: a sharp whitting knife, paintbrushes, tempera paint, paper for printing, old cloths. Follow these directions: Cut the potato to obtain the largest surface possible. Wipe the surface of the cut portion with a cloth to remove excess moisture and brush paint on the surface. Begin to cut the design. Enlist the aid of parent volunteers or older students to assist with the carving. Basic shapes—circles, triangles, squares—make a good starting point because they can be used in combination to create pictures. Outline the shape with the knife. Start cutting away the rest of the potato to leave the outlined shape standing alone. Cut to a depth of about one-half inch. Paint the shape, keeping the paint rather thick. Press the painted shape on paper, while maintaining fairly even pressure with your hand. Allow the print to dry; then mix and match shapes and colors to create a design or picture. Two books, One Potato and Wildflower ABC, both by Diana Pomeroy (Harcourt) contain excellent examples of potato print art.

Ask students, “What can you do with a potato?” and make a chart of their responses. Expect typical responses of ways to prepare potatoes, but also encourage imaginative responses, such as “prop open a window” or “play baseball with it.” Keep the chart posted so students can add to it as they think of new ideas.

As a science experiment, allow some objects to decompose. Possibilities include a piece of potato, an apple, a carrot, an orange, a pumpkin, and others. Start the project by taking pictures of the objects with a digital camera. Have students place a picture of their object in an observation log and form hypotheses about what might happen and when. Check on the progress of each item monthly. Have them take new pictures and make notes about the changes in their logs. At the end of the project, compare and contrast the process across objects. Discuss which item decomposed the most/least quickly and the appearance of the different items as they decomposed. (Consider that some odor might occur during the decomposition process. Select containers and location for the experiment accordingly.)
Distinguish objects that do not decompose from those that do. Gather a variety of natural (leaves, flowers, seeds, wood, etc.) and manufactured (plastic bags, aluminum foil, tin cans, etc.) items that are typically discarded and place them on a table. Have students sort them into two piles: items that decompose and those that do not. Discuss the differences between natural and manufactured items.

Graph the students’ favorite ways to eat potatoes.

Research the nutritional value of potatoes and discuss potatoes in relation to healthy eating habits.

Make handmade paper with students using the information and directions found at <http://www.pioneerthinking.com/makingpaper.html>.

The “eyes” of a potato may be an unfamiliar expression for some students. Discuss the use of the word “eye” in other contexts. For example, a needle has an “eye,” as does a storm. Expressions such as “keep your eyes on me,” “see eye-to-eye,” and “eyes in the back of her head” are also possibilities. Encourage students to listen for other examples and share them in class.

Obtain a copy of the book so that students can examine the illustrations and print. Discuss the collage style and the use of different types of media in creating the pictures. Invite students to experiment with print and illustrations in a similar manner with their own stories.

RELATED THEMES:
plants and seeds
ecology
recycling

RELATED READING RAINBOW PROGRAMS:
Program #57 Stay Away from the Junkyard!
Program #99 And Still the Turtle Watched
Program #100 June 29, 1999
Program #129 Giving Thanks: A Native American Good Morning Message

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
John Coy is the author of several award-winning books for children. In addition to writing, he visits schools as a writing teacher. John makes his home in Minneapolis, where he enjoys growing and eating potatoes.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR:
Carolyn Fisher grew up on a farm in southern Alberta, Canada, with lots of animals. Now, when she’s not making pictures in her studio, she teaches illustration at the Alberta College of Art and Design and travels around the country talking about art and books. Carolyn presently lives in Calgary with her husband.

BOOKS REVIEWED BY CHILDREN:
WESLANDIA
by Paul Fleischman, illus. by Kevin Hawkes (Candlewick)
DIARY OF A WORM
by Doreen Cronin, illus. by Harry Bliss (HarperCollins)
PIE IN THE SKY
by Lois Ehlert (Harcourt)

SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKLIST:
HOW GROUNDHOG’S GARDEN GREW
by Lynne Cherry (Scholastic)
THE ENORMOUS POTATO
retold by Aubrey Davis, illus. by Dusan Petricic (Kids Can Press)
RECYCLE! A HANDBOOK FOR KIDS
by Gail Gibbons (Little, Brown)
SOMETHING FROM NOTHING
by Phoebe Gilman (Scholastic)
AN EARTHWORM’S LIFE
by John Himmelman (Children’s Press)
LUCK WITH POTATOES
by Helen Ketteman, illus. by Brian Floca (Orchard)
THE GREAT TRASH BASH
by Loreen Leedy (Holiday House)
COMPOST, BY GOSH!
by Michelle Eva Portman (Flower Press)
THE OLD RED ROCKING CHAIR
by Phyllis Root, illus. by John Sandford (Little, Brown)
WHERE DOES THE GARBAGE GO?
by Paul Showers, illus. by Randy Chewning (HarperCollins)
BRAVE POTATOES
by Toby Speed, illus. by Barry Root (Putnam)
DIRT
by Steve Tomecek, illus. by Nancy Woodman (National Geographic)
Jordan Puryear reads “Two Old Potatoes and Me,” about a girl who works with her father to recycle two rotted potatoes by replanting them using the sprouts to grow a whole new crop of potatoes. LeVar, working with his daughter, is inspired to make potato dishes from recipes in the book. Synopsis. It looks like we don't have a Synopsis for this title yet. In this book, a girl discovers two old potatoes that have begun to sprout at the back of the cupboard. She goes to throw them away, but her dad suggests instead that they try to grow new potatoes from the old ones. The story details how they prepare the soil, care for the plants, and protect the plants from potato beetles. Their patience and hard work are rewarded with a brimming bucket of new potatoes. Just like the new potatoes that emerged from ugly old potatoes, this dad and daughter move on and make a new life together in the face of unavoidable and unpleasant change. Carolyn Fisher's artwork will be instantly recognizable from her recent picture book debut, A Twisted Tale, and her trademark high-energy art and design infuse joy and humor into this heartwarming story.