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Hana Hou!

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School of the Soil

Story by David Thompson
 Photos by Olivier Koning

Pua Mendoca knows who's been nibbling holes in the leaves of her taro, eggplant and basil. Mendoca is the *kumu kahua mala*, or school garden instructor, at a charter school in Hilo called Ka 'Umeke Ka'eo. The culprits nibbling on the leaves? They're the Chinese rose beetles that recently discovered the school's raised vegetable beds. But Kumu Pua, as the children call her, has a plan to end the beetles' schoolyard feast. It involves worms and kindergartners.

The kindergartners stand beside a row of rainbow chard and lettuce on a sunny afternoon as Kumu Pua explains. I listen, but it's not immediately clear to me what's happening because Ka 'Umeke is a Hawaiian language immersion school, and all of the instruction is given in a language I don't speak. I already know Mendoca's larger goal, though. "I want every child to leave this school knowing how to grow their own food," she'd told me earlier.

As Mendoca explains the beetle situation to the kindergartners, who are just beginning to learn Hawaiian, she acts out her words. From the pantomime I figure out that the children are going to spray the plants with what looks like iced tea (it's worm compost leachate) and that this will protect the plants by making them taste bad to the rose beetles. The children grab spray bottles and go to work, enthusiastically blasting every plant in the garden—and a few beyond it—with a protective coating of lukewarm worm juice. It's just another day of learning by doing in the garden at Ka 'Umeke Ka'eo and in dozens of other school gardens throughout the Islands.



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