



# Grass Roots Newsletter

## Celebrating 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Planting Day



The Save Crystal River Annual Student Planting Day took place recently on Tuesday, May 26, 2026. The event brought together about 100 fifth-grade students at Hunter Springs Park and Kings Bay Park to transplant eelgrass they had spent the school year nurturing in classroom aquariums.

The annual planting event marks a culmination of the school year's curriculum, giving students hands-on experience in environmental science, water quality, and the ongoing Kings Bay restoration efforts.

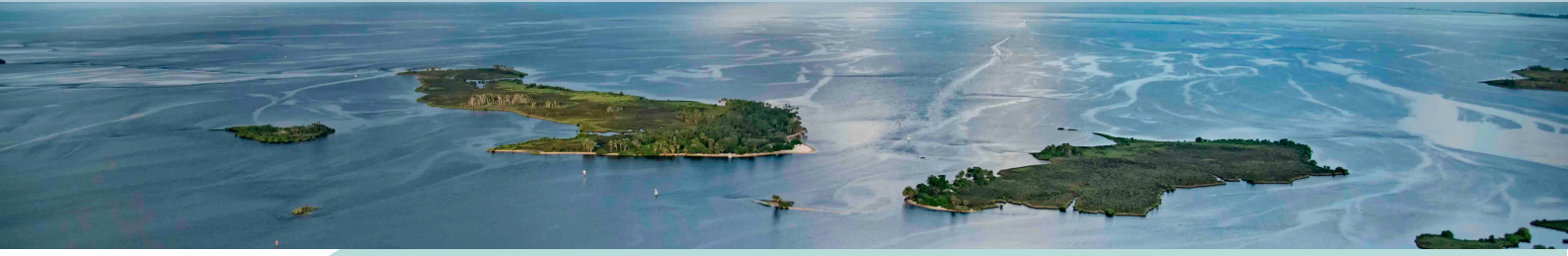
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## Cornerstone of Restoration & Education Efforts

A decade after fifth graders first began planting eelgrass in Kings Bay, the restoration effort they helped launch has become one of Florida's most closely watched environmental recovery projects.

On Tuesday, May 26, students once again returned to Hunter Springs Park for Save Crystal River's annual Student Planting Day, an event that combines hands-on restoration work with environmental education centered on Crystal River's fragile spring system.

The event, led by Save Crystal River and supported by volunteers and environmental partners, allows students to plant eelgrass they have spent the school year growing in classroom aquariums. The grasses are then transplanted into Kings Bay as part of a long-running effort to restore habitat damaged by algae blooms and declining water quality.

Student Planting Day has been a cornerstone of our restoration and education efforts for a decade. Each year, students plant eelgrass in a designated area of Hunter Springs Park where community members can visit and see the progress over time. It's a living, visible demonstration of what restoration looks like and a reminder that the work is ongoing.

Save Crystal River formed in 2012 after residents, business owners and environmental advocates became alarmed by the spread of lyngbya algae throughout Kings Bay and Crystal River's spring system. Since then, the organization has worked alongside restoration contractors and state agencies to remove algae, reopen spring vents and replant native eelgrass beds. The organization has restored more than 120 acres of seagrass habitat in Kings Bay and associated canals, reopened more than 890 spring vents and removed more than 700 million pounds of lyngbya algae from the bay floor over the past decade.

Although recent hurricanes damaged some grass beds and root systems, biologists are now seeing signs of significant recovery. We are seeing improved water clarity in restored areas, the return of fish and wildlife to previously degraded habitats, and seagrass beds that are holding even after significant storm impacts.

An independent biologist surveyed the restored areas last year and found recovery occurring in nearly all planting zones. Areas with more severe storm damage have since received supplemental plantings.



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## Educational Component a Defining Feature

Students participating in planting day not only transplant eelgrass but also rotate through stations focused on manatee anatomy, spring ecology, algae removal and protecting seagrass from boat anchors and propeller scarring. Previous events have also included underwater virtual reality experiences designed to simulate diving in the springs. The long-term goal is to build a lasting sense of stewardship among local students.

What we see year after year is that students who plant eelgrass don't just learn about restoration, they develop a personal connection to Kings Bay. We have had students return as volunteers, parents bring their children back to the sites where they planted, and teachers tell us that their students talk about Kings Bay differently after participating.

Organizers are also hoping to deepen partnerships with the Academy of Environmental Science, where some students have already pursued careers connected to environmental science and restoration.

Save Crystal River's goal is that the knowledge and benefits of this educational partnership will last for generations to come. This generation is working to fix the problems associated with Kings Bay. The next generation's goal will be to keep it a pristine outstanding Florida waterway for the long haul.



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## Restoration Methods Expand Far Beyond Kings Bay

The techniques pioneered locally, including lyngbya removal before planting, spring vent restoration and community-based planting programs, have been referenced by restoration practitioners and water managers throughout Florida. Projects modeled after the Kings Bay approach have since been implemented in the Indian River Lagoon, Florida Keys, Caloosahatchee River, St. Johns River and, most recently, Lake Okeechobee.

This project and the methodology that's used here has spread across the state in multiple areas from lakes to inlets to beach areas, other rivers and areas where we can restore their ecosystem like we've done here. It started in Crystal River and now it is everywhere.

Save Crystal River's current work includes restoration phases in Miller's Creek, Cedar Cove, Magnolia Cove, Pete's Pier and several upland canals. The organization is also expanding related resiliency projects, including a hybrid reef installation at Parker Island and spring restoration efforts at locations such as King Spring, Three Sisters Springs and Jurassic Spring. Our broader goal is a fully restored Kings Bay, where seagrass, springs and shorelines are functioning as a healthy, connected ecosystem.



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**Helping preserve the ecosystem made the experience even more meaningful for these young learners. it just gives you hope for the future.**

"I try and help the environment wherever I go, like picking up trash at the beach," said Grady, one of the students. "I just feel like this is a bigger help than I've ever done and I feel like I was accomplishing something."

"I've always been fascinated with marine life, so it just feels so amazing to finally contribute to how beautiful it is," said Stormie Pursell, a fifth grader at Crystal River Primary School.

"It's really cool and interesting because you could see everything, like how it grows and then you get to plant it in a new environment," said Kinsley Collins, another fifth grader. "It's not just helping the manatees, it's helping the whole ecosystem."

**And over time, these students will be able to see their hard work pay off as the eelgrass grows below the water's surface.**



Thank you!

Crystal River Primary School  
Guyer's Ice Cream & Doughnuts  
The Mertailors  
Parks & Recreation  
Plantation Realty  
Scubanauts  
Sea & Shoreline  
Save Crystal River Volunteers  
US Fish & Wildlife  
University of Southern  
Florida Students



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## We Couldn't Do it Without You!

*"I would like to personally thank all of the Save Crystal River volunteers and the many organizations that came together to help us with the 2026 Student Planting Day event at Hunter Springs! The community support is phenomenal. From planting eelgrass to science experiments - the kids loved all of the activities. Principal Christina Touchton said the students were still talking about the fun they had after they returned to school.*

*We are hoping to create future stewards of the coastal environment.*

*Thank you from the bottom of my heart!"*

- Janis Tripp, Volunteer Coordinator

**Let us know of your area(s) of interest - we will welcome you to our Volunteer team!**

**Contact us at (352) 257-6359 or email:  
info@savecrystalriver.com**

**Have any fundraising experience?** We are looking for a new fundraising committee chair, or even to serve on a fundraising committee.

**Any graphics design experience?** We are always looking for great ideas for t-shirts, and posters, etc.

**Like to do photography?** We can always use high quality photography of the water environment, including fish, birds, manatees, people having fun in/on the water, etc.

**Do you have an underwater camera?** Great underwater footage is always welcome, especially if it's pointing to springs, islands, wildlife, water habitat, eelgrass, etc.

**Enjoy writing?** We're always looking for great articles tying our mission and projects to the health and beauty of our waterways.

**Got a small group that wants to collectively help?** We run roadside cleanup programs periodically, and we have the tools and materials for that.

**Grant writing experience?** We are always searching for such talent to join our grant writers' team.

**Internet search talents?** We could use research assistance with finding charitable foundations who would be interested in supporting Save Crystal River.

**Specialty events volunteer coverage** such as Eco Week (annually in the fall), Student Planting Days (annually in the spring), science nights at middle schools, etc. Our Volunteer Chair would love to keep you in mind for these and other volunteer opportunities that come up during the year.

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