



May 13, 2024

Media Release

Virginia Student Teams Win Big in International Plant the Moon Challenge Competition, Helping NASA Return to the Moon

HAMPTON, Virginia — Two teams of Virginia high school students topped more than 600 teams to take home top international prizes in a competition to grow crops in lunar soil simulant.

The students and their teachers participated in an expanded version of the Institute of Competition Sciences Plant the Moon Challenge through a regional partnership of state Space Grant consortia led by the Virginia Space Grant Consortium and funded by NASA.

The global science experiment and research competition challenges students to examine how vegetable crops can grow in lunar soil. Using lunar soil simulant from the University of Central Florida's CLASS Exolith Lab, the teams designed and conducted a set of experiments using the simulant to grow crops over eight weeks for a future long-duration mission. Students' research will help NASA scientists understand how to use lunar soil to provide nutritious crops for future missions to the Moon or Mars.

The Purslane Gang from Heritage High School in Leesburg, led by Amy Goodyear, a three-time winner and VSGC master teacher, won best in show for high school experimental design. And the YAPPERS from Meadowbrook High School in North Chesterfield, led by Belinda Henriques, another veteran VSGC teacher, won best in show for high school crop growth.

"I am so proud of all my students who participated. They have all grown in their scientific ability and working together as a team to problem-solve challenges as they arise. I know they will continue to reap the benefits from this experience," Goodyear said.

The Institute of Competition Sciences engaged a panel of NASA and industry scientists, program executives, and other dignitaries to determine Best in Show award winners from the region. Awards were also announced for the following categories in each state for both the middle school and high school levels: Evaluation of Results, Growth, Experimental Design, and Innovation.

In Virginia, 89 middle and high school teams and a total of about 900 students competed. Here are the state winners:

- For Evaluation of Results, the Astrogardeners from Immanuel Christian School in Springfield, led by Leslie Johnston and the Moonshrooms from Freeman High School in Richmond, led by Orien Altman

- For Growth, the Blue Shark Scientists from Oak Knoll Middle School in Mechanicsville, led by Kara Zedaker and the YAPPERS from Meadowbrook High School in North Chesterfield, led by Belinda Henriques
- For Experimental Design, the SJNA Knights from St. John Neumann Academy in Blacksburg, led by Audrey Phillips and the Purslane Gang from Heritage High School in Leesburg, led by Amy Goodyear
- For Innovation, Team Lunar Planters from Immanuel Christian School in Springfield, led by Leslie Johnston and the Lunar Legion team from Eastern View High School in Culpepper, led by Rachel Stuart, which was also highlighted for their hypothesis.

For a full list of international, regional, and state winners please visit: vsgc.odu.edu/plantthemoon.

The NASA Space Grant Regional Expansion Project builds on the Plant the Moon Challenge by expanding the reach of the challenge to underserved and underrepresented STEM students in five partnering states: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia, Florida, and Puerto Rico. VSGC and program partners are excited to work with the Institute of Competition Sciences to allow more students and educators to participate while covering the cost of regolith kits, adding a materials stipend for participating teachers, expanding professional development for educators, enhancing speakers and activities for participants, and an award ceremony and special science experience in each state and at the regional level.

The Plant the Moon Challenge Space Grant Regional Expansion Project will be offered again in the spring semester of 2025. For more information, contact: vsgc@odu.edu.