Each spring, Rene Gingras and the students in his Horticulture Club take turns choosing the soundtrack for their road trip to Pennsylvania’s Longwood Gardens. Ever democratic, Gingras allows the students to switch up his beloved classic rock with hip-hop and rap.

A willingness to listen is partly why he was honored for excellence in teaching this year. Gingras attributes the award to the handful of new classes he’s recently put together in response to his students’ interests.

When students returning from work assignments began asking about irrigation design several years ago, for example, he spent part of a sabbatical “tagging along” on irrigation installations with a local landscaping company, started attending an annual conference sponsored by the Irrigation Association Education Foundation, and created a class culminating in a hands-on installation. Three years ago, he added a landscape lighting course. Last year, he started a new course in pond design, and this year, he hopes to implement a course in harvesting rainwater.

After teaching at the Thompson School for three decades, Gingras says, “I try to stay ahead of the curve … It’s very easy to just do what you always have. The new classes make me feel rejuvenated.”

Gingras says he once dreamed of owning a strawberry farm. Tapped to teach fruit and vegetable growing at the Thompson School in the late 1970s, he initially struggled in the classroom, taking education courses and sitting in on others’ classes to improve his teaching skills.

Today, he’s confident in the classroom, even though there’s less of a demand for fruit and vegetable education. A growing focus on sustainability may bring those classes back, or spark a future partnership with the Organic Garden Club or the University’s Sustainability Academy. And though he’ll always prefer Mick Jagger to Lil Wayne, Gingras says he looks forward to each year’s new group of students. “They’re always different. It’s exciting to learn new things.”

—Hope Jordan