

MI School Garden Sows Seeds of Learning

Wednesday, September 22, 2010 • Contributed By: Mason City Schools

Mason Intermediate fourth grade science teachers Patty Quill and Becky Roussos are planting more than a school garden with their students this fall. "We are 'planting' understanding of the hard work that goes on behind the scenes of growing food, the process needed for food to develop, and an introduction to the nutritional value of what is planted," noted Roussos. Best of all, the garden is also a hands-on learning tool for many fourth grade science and math curriculum objectives: plant life cycles, plant classification, plant parts and functions, seasonal cycles, data collection, interpreting results, and measurement.

The project started last summer when Paula Mangold, Marketing Team Leader for Whole Foods Market, offered to help install a school garden. That's when Wes Duren of Marvin's Organic Gardens got involved as well, and in July, he met with Mangold, Quill, and Roussos to determine a site for the project at MI. In August, Whole Foods hosted a 5% Day to fund the project and raised nearly \$1,500, "the biggest 5% Day we've ever had," according to Mangold.

On September 11, Duren, Mangold, Quill, and Roussos, along with twelve students and their families, volunteered their time to install the garden of nine raised beds, modeling it after the one at Cottell Park in Deerfield Township. Marvin's Gardens donated the compost for the beds, and the City of Mason donated and delivered safe wood chips for the paths. Natorp's, the Feed Barn, Greenfield Gardens, and Bern's donated seeds and plants, while Lowe's offered a 20% discount on necessary supplies. "This project allowed us to build a partnership with community businesses and our families," said Quill.



(Above) Marvin Duren of Marvin's Organic Gardens helps Mason Intermediate fourth graders plant vegetables in the school's new garden.

Marvin Duren and Mangold returned to MI on September 13 to help students plant the garden with kale, radishes, lettuce, beets, spinach, and Swiss chard. Quill said that planting in the fall presented a unique situation and, as a result, students had to research

not only what could grow in the fall, but also how to take care of these plants. In the process, though, students learned about vegetables they have never eaten before. "It would be great if students introduce a new vegetable to their families from this experience," said Roussos.

Students in Quill and Roussos' classes will continue to water and weed the garden, and other MI classes will be encouraged to take advantage of the hands-on learning provided by this project. The community will benefit as well-- food grown in the garden will be donated to MI's Hunter's Hope and the Food Pantry.

The garden is also a perfect opportunity to integrate Problem Based Learning into the curriculum, which was the basis of a class Quill and Roussos attended last summer, and an academic target in Mason City Schools' 10-Year Plan. "The garden will continue to provide a forum for our students to practice problem-solving skills in a real-world setting," noted Quill.

And just like the real world, the garden will certainly present its share of challenges as the project progresses. Quill and Roussos said that they are all still learning how often to check on the garden and what they should be looking for as the plants grow. They will be counting on support from Marvin's Gardens, along with their students and families who garden at home, to provide problem-solving help when needed. "I am definitely a rookie at this," shared Quill, "but I can't wait to learn right alongside my students!"