

WATCHING THEIR GARDEN GROW



If you give a class of 2nd grade students some composting worms, they will make a garden to go with them. That is exactly what happened last fall in Danielle Eszlinger's 2nd grade classroom in the Baltic School District.

The class adopted some composting worms from another 2nd grade classroom and the ideas started flowing about how they could use the rich compost created by their castings.

The kids went to work creating a plan to build a school community garden.

They started by learning about different kinds of gardens and the different types of plants they could grow. The kids worked closely with Chris Zdorovtsov from the SDSU Extension Office to learn about the care and maintenance of a garden. They decided if their garden was going to be one that the entire community could enjoy, it needed to be a raised bed garden.

With the new information and preliminary garden plans, the class set off to learn more about the existing ground bed community garden.

The students enlisted the help of a local pastor, Ryan Franchuk and congregation member Laura Garness, of Christ Fellowship Church. This church started the original ground bed community garden. The congregation supported the idea of raised beds for the community garden and decided to join the class to make it happen.

Now that the 2nd grade students had a place to put the garden, they needed to let the school and city leaders know their plan.

Zdorovtsov worked closely with them to develop a blueprint for the garden layout. The students created a PowerPoint presentation full of meaningful information that would give the city council and school board insight into their goals for the garden and how it would benefit their learning and their community.

With all of the pieces in place, they went to a Baltic school board meeting to get their approval. Then, they moved on to the city council with their request. At each public meeting the kids were confident in their knowledge and had practiced their public speaking skills to effectively communicate their mission.

They received overwhelming support and approval from both the school board and city council.

After receiving approval, the work really began. The 2nd grade students needed to set up a growing system in their classroom to start the young plants during the winter months.

They also needed to find funding to support the construction of 31 raised garden beds of varied sizes. At the same time,

they needed to continue to learn more about their composting worms and other ways to support a healthy garden so their thumbs would be nice and green by the time they were ready to plant. They embarked on a robust fundraiser that included a story in the local newspaper, advertising flyers, and a number of personal presentations for local residents and businesses.

Along with the campaign, they found local master gardeners to partner with them in teaching them about garden plants, healthy soils, and bugs that can help or hurt your garden.

The kids went to work installing a greenhouse system in their classroom to start tomatoes, cucumbers and various other plants.

Steve Sikorski, a master gardener, came to their classroom to help them create one of the garden boxes using 2X12 lumber and power tools. In turn, the students put their new expertise to work over the next three weekends building the remaining boxes with their family, friends, classmates and community members.

Zdorovtsov and Sikorski continued to make their regular visits to their school to offer guidance and support in the process. Many parents and community members also offered their fields of expertise to assist in making this lofty goal become a reality.

When spring finally came it was time to put all of the pieces of this garden puzzle together.

What else could the kids do, but have a garden party?

They planned a celebration for the entire school and community to participate in. There were shovels handy so the guests could help with planting, there were rocks to paint, maps of the garden plan and of course, treats, but not your normal party treats.

The treats consisted of things that could be grown in a garden—carrot and celery sticks and dip, bruschetta made with different peppers and veggie kabobs.

The entire class came out on a beautiful spring evening to share their learning, their excitement about the garden and the importance of the garden that will be a long lasting part of their community.

As the summer months passed, the kids and community came together to water and weed the garden and enjoy its harvest.

In the fall, the founding group of 2nd grade students moved on for new experiences in 3rd grade, yet they always have a role in the care and maintenance of the Baltic School and Community Garden.

They leave a legacy of learning for the next group of students because as all gardeners know, there will always be plants to grow, weeds to pull, features to add, and of course, worms to care for.

