

Rock County UW Extension: Micro-Grants and Micro-Gardens



What can you do with one hundred dollars and a little extra know-how? Christy Marsden and Kathy Hetzel of Rock County UW Extension decided to find out. In the spring of 2014, with funding through a Transform Wisconsin grant, the pair designated six \$100 garden gift cards to be given to early education or child-care sites in the county.

In order to receive this garden micro-grant, facilities were required to send two representatives to attend a spring garden training, co-led by Marsden, Hetzel, and WSGI's Beth Hanna. The training covered different ways to engage young students in the garden, as well as ways to connect the garden to literacy.

"The idea behind the project was really all Kathy's," said Marsden, who is a Horticulture Educator with a particular passion for school gardens. Hetzel, who is a Family Living Educator, wanted to incorporate literacy with nutrition in a way that could involve families, too. After a summer of growing, Marsden and Hetzel visited each of the micro-grant gardens, to see how they had used the money. "It was interesting to see what each facility did with it – every garden was different," said Marsden.

Some centers used the money as a part of a larger garden funding plan to support existing gardens, while others started totally new gardens. With just \$100 and some community support, a childcare center in Milton tilled a plot near their play area for a sunflower house, veggies, painted rocks, and logs perfect for worm-hunting. The ABC Playhouse childcare center in Beloit used their \$100 to buy a kid-sized rain barrel, where students can easily fill watering cans on their own. The barrel is near the garden, engaging students and resolving the center's prior irrigation challenges. "Our spout for the hose is not easily accessible, so it's just awesome, the rain barrel with the watering cans next to is, and seeing the children busy, busy, busy, watering the garden," Playhouse director Janet Jensen said.



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This story was produced by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, a program of Community GroundWorks. For more information, visit www.wischoolgardens.org.



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Marsden is also involved in other projects to support and promote school gardens via her work with Extension. This year, with a simple bucket-and-tomato-cage design, Marsden will co-teach a workshop on container gardens and nutrition for parents and teachers of preschoolers at a training organized by Preschool for Janesville and Rock County's Headstart.

The group will work together to assemble and plant the containers, and take them home. "Because the container is really kid-sized, it's easy for them to get involved at home," Marsden said. "We also know that many of the families in our area don't own homes, so it is difficult to start a garden, if you don't have a permanent space for it. With the container, you can put it on a sunny balcony or front step, and if you move, you can take it with you!"

We're hoping to use the containers to make gardening accessible to families and kids who otherwise might not be able to garden." Marsden noted that while it is easier to bring people to the table when there is money to give away, she hopes to continue being a support and knowledge base for school gardens even after garden-specific grants come to a close. She is currently working to connect Master Gardener Volunteers and other community members with school gardens in Rock County, and will continue to offer educational materials and resources for school gardens in her area.

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