

Luck School Garden: Going Green and Healthy



In less than two weeks, the world will don green garments and celebrate the luck of the Irish. In Luck, Wisconsin, students and teachers will be imagining the arrival of green in their garden as they plant seeds inside their classrooms in preparation for an all-school planting day in early June. As you drive into Luck, you are welcomed with pictures of shamrocks and horseshoes, and a sign that says, “You’re in Luck!”

The town’s puny greeting is a mere sign (another pun intended) of its tight-knit community. This sense of community extends to Luck’s K-12 school, whose 4,000-square-foot garden brings together students, teachers, neighbors, parents, and other members of the Luck community. “The whole idea is the community involvement and getting kids to understand that they are a part of something bigger and can give back to their community,” Ann Goldbach, Luck’s principal for its elementary grades, said. “It’s just a great lesson all the way around.”



The sense of community Goldbach is hoping to achieve is integrated throughout the garden program she helped to create in 2009. Students in grades K-6 collaborate to grow seedlings for the garden, and work together to get them in the ground before summer vacation. During the summer months, Goldbach and her garden committee arrange for community volunteers to care for the plants each week. Produce harvested during the summer is donated to the community food pantry. Luck’s high school shop class built the garden’s many raised beds, as well as a shed to store tools – many of which were donated by community members. Even the garden’s biggest challenge of finding a reliable water source was solved through community collaboration: one of the school’s neighbors volunteered her garden hose – with water use paid by volume – to fill the school’s large watering tank.

In the fall, pumpkins go to the teachers, who use them for math lessons such as estimating (“How many seeds?”), measuring, and other projects. Fifth and sixth

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grade students bring the rest of the harvest into the cafeteria, where everything is used. The summer months away have not gone to waste. “It’s really neat for the kids to see the difference from spring when there’s nothing there to the fall when everything is massive. We usually have enough tomatoes for the entire county,” Goldbach said with a laugh.

Luck can certainly count it as good fortune to have Goldbach leading its elementary school and garden program. After serving as a school principal and school garden implementer near Chicago for over two decades, Goldbach moved to northwestern Wisconsin to spend her retirement. Her “retirement” has included plenty of time spent sharing her green thumb, as well as her green grant writing skills. She began by attending a “Got Dirt?” training session in Spooner, Wisconsin, where she gained access to local resources – and funding.

Since then, Luck’s entire garden project has been funded by various grants, including funding from the Wisconsin Agriculture Association, a Captain America Scholarship, and a Mantis Tiller grant from kidsGardening.org. “It was funny with the Mantis grant,” she said, “because they never even contacted me – one day a tiller just showed up at our door!” One grant required Luck to be a Green and Healthy School in order to apply. The separate application was relatively easy for Luck, which already has a large focus on health and wellness. In addition to marrying movement to academics in the garden and in the classroom, Goldbach said that her school has responded to the federal government’s recent emphasis on eating healthy. “Our cafeteria offerings have changed, and the garden is part of that,” she said.

The garden at Luck is somewhat of an anomaly in rural northern Wisconsin. “Not many schools in this area have gardens,” Goldbach said. “In Chicago, not many people had vegetable gardens because there wasn’t much space. When I came here, I really thought the kids would have more experience growing

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things because they live on farms. It's funny to see how many kids have first experience planting things in our garden."

Goldbach thinks that start-up costs are often a barrier in northern Wisconsin, where personal pockets don't always run deep. Goldbach's collaborative attitude and determination to see the garden program thrive led her to resources at the local, state, and national level. She particularly enjoyed her beginnings with the Wisconsin Got Dirt initiative. "I think that was extremely helpful to me, including where to find Extension and Master Gardener services," she said.

The story of Luck's name is often associated with northward-bound pioneers. "By the time they got here, they felt lucky to have made it this far!" Goldbach said. As students sprinkle dirt over seeds this St. Patrick's Day, the hope of a bountiful harvest certainly ties them to their town's pioneering history. But the intentionality, persistence, and community contributions that brought the Luck school garden into being – and keep it green and healthy each year – have much more than just luck on their side.

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