

## Turtle Lake School Garden: Coins & Collaboration



The school garden at Turtle Lake started out small, with room to grow. The 36-by-36-foot plot – which contains a central courtyard for student seating as well as corn, tomatoes, herbs, and flowers – was designed by the school’s Environmental Science class to expand outwards in concentric squares, each expansion adding a new layer.

The garden, which celebrated its first growing season in the spring of 2013, is already a great success at the PreK-12 school. As 2014 blows in with its sub-zero wind chill, excitement is already high and plans are in place for the coming spring at Turtle Lake. In the coming year, the school hopes to expand the garden, and involve students ever more in its planning and upkeep. They’re also hoping for an early spring, so students can get started with soil testing, life cycle studies, and of course, planting.

Students are already highly involved with the garden. In addition to helping with design, classes visit often to tend and observe the plants as well as read, paint, and practice lifestyle fitness. Turtle Lake has also received a 2014 PEP grant to build a small greenhouse, where horticulture students will start seedlings. Lead teacher Doug Kahl is brimming with optimism about what comes next. “Once we get the greenhouse and tie that into the garden, I really think the possibilities are limitless in what we can do with it.”

How does such a small school do so much? Like many gardens, it began with an idea, and someone to run with it. When principal Kent Kindschy approached the staff with a DPI grant proposal and a request for someone to take the lead, Kahl and his fellow teacher Gale Gores stepped forward. The first thing they did? Ask for help. After making a list of interested teachers, they got students involved. While Kahl’s Environmental Science students worked on garden design, Gores began a penny drive among elementary students to buy mulch for the courtyard – a cost not covered by the grant. As students brought in coins, classes charted



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their fundraising growth. Within a week, they had met their goal.

“If I could give advice to anyone,” Kahl said, “I’d say start small and try to include as many people as you can – that has really made it much easier and more fun. This was definitely a collaborative effort between many different people. One person can’t do it all.”

Kahl’s other garden wisdom for making garden resolutions come true is to work little by little. “We are expanding our garden next year, not a lot, but a little bit,” Kahl said. “Start small. Don’t make it so big. Anyone who’s ever weeded a garden knows that.”

The student response to the garden? “A lot of fun,” Kahl said. “They really enjoy getting their hands dirty.” The garden has also drawn students together: high school science classes compare the performance of different corn varieties right next to the junior kinder”garden,” where students observe the daily growth of seedlings.

As the snow melts and those seedlings make their grand entrance into 2014, we won’t have to hope that Turtle Lake’s garden dreams will come true. We’ll be looking to them for inspiration.

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