

Webster Elementary: Garden Buddies



At Webster Elementary, students look up to their peers. They don't have to look too far, however. That's because the school's oldest students – fourth graders – can be found squatting down to harvest potatoes, wrangle weeds, or investigate soil critters with Webster's younger Garden Buddies. These young leaders help Kindergarteners tend plants and complete special projects – such as growing seedlings for an annual plant sale or making container gardens for After 3's Family Night.

This year, three former Webster Elementary students – now high schoolers – have been invited to return for another leadership role in the garden. Once a week during the After 3 afterschool program, these Webster High School students work as garden assistants. The best part? Garden assistants get paid by the hour. The opportunity to have an afterschool job that also lets them give back to their school community, be a positive role model for younger students, and continue connecting with positive experiences from their past is a unique and valuable experience for any teenager. Likewise, elementary students benefit by seeing their role models engaged in healthy activities.

At Webster, Garden Buddies help their peers work and learn in the garden. Below: a student's drawing of the school's "Tiger Territory."



The After 3 program's garden efforts are supported by in-school garden-based learning in Terry Day's fourth grade class, as well as Kindergarten classes at Webster. Day is as enthusiastic about learning in the garden as any of her students, and talking with her is an inspiring rush of ideas for engaging students outdoors. For example, Day taught her students about weeds by creating a game she called Cops and Robbers. "The weeds are the robbers because we learn how they steal nutrients from our plants," she said. "We learned how to identify the most common weeds and then made "WANTED" signs with a picture of the weed so students – the cops – would remember what each one looked like." Day's students are working on researching other weeds so they can pick them and put them in the garden "jail," aka five-gallon bucket!

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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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Webster students work outdoors on convertible benches.



Other academic connections include planting pumpkins in spring, and returning in fall to measure circumference and study density – will it float? – followed, of course, by students carving their own pumpkin. Students practice counting and estimating with sunflower seeds, read in the garden with their older book buddies, and participate in taste testing on a regular basis. Tiger garden projects have also included

planting Mother’s Day flowers, and using sunflower seeds saved from fall to create a “January garden” of suet balls (hung on old Christmas trees) for winter birds. This fall, After 3 students will create an obstacle course among old plants to extend their outdoor time even after they put their garden “to bed” for the season.

The Webster Tiger Territory garden began with baby steps in 2008, when the school used a “Got Dirt” grant to install three raised beds. With each passing year, the garden has expanded in both growing space, and number of students involved. The 2013-14 school year saw the addition of five apple trees, as well as convertible benches built by a high school class called Webster Tiger Manufacturing to expand the garden’s function as an outdoor classroom.

Day is part of a team that meets once a month to set goals and objectives as the garden continues to grow at Webster. Day’s fellow team members .

This year, the garden team – which also includes kindergarten teachers Jessie Hedrick, Nicole McCorison, and Laura Eckart – is working to connect their garden efforts with Green and Healthy School certification. Although the garden used several small grants to get started, the program is sustained completely through a student-centered annual spring plant sale, in which students sell seedling starts, as well as plants donated by parents and volunteers.

Webster’s long-term plan for sustaining the garden program financially helps to ensure that the Tigers who are discovering the garden as Kindergarteners this fall can return as teens to relive the wonder they found as five year olds, and to help the next generation of kinder-gardeners find the same magic in soil, worms, and plants.

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