

Watershed garden flowers at Kimball Elementary

03/08/2006

"Who wants an earthworm?" exclaimed fourth-grader Julie Ho while proudly displaying the crawler to her friends, who reacted with a mix of squeamishness and delight. Ho found the worm while digging a home for a new plant in Kimball Elementary School's garden, where she and her classmates added 275 plants to the land as part of the Watershed Gardens program, sponsored by local non-profit Homewaters Project.

The aim of Homewaters educational programs is to teach Seattle students about their community through field experiences, and to help teachers integrate this work into existing curricula.



Garrett Mar gets grubby planting native species in the Kimball Elementary garden. Photo: DENISE MILLER

This group of fourth-graders has been learning about their native environment since the beginning of the school year, when students started studying and measuring water use with their teachers and Linda Versage, the coordinator of the project for Homewaters.

Learning about water conservation and how to identify leaks at home was just the beginning.

"They're researching native plants, studying the climate, and using math to measure the garden. There are so many applications, and they get excited because these are things from real life. It's more fun than just learning from a book," said Karma Sawka, one of the fourth-grade teachers involved in the project.

After researching plants native to the region, the students selected which ones to place in their garden.

"They've really become very familiar with the plants—they know their names and even get attached to certain types," Versage said.

While Ho's favorite part of the project is discovering earthworms, she said she's enjoyed other aspects and learned about her home environment. Ho, who said she usually thinks writing is "boring," admitted she had fun studying and reporting on the plants.

Hours of bookwork were rewarded with some hands-on experience, and Sawka said she was surprised by how eager the students were to get their hands dirty.

"It's always good for kids to get out of the classroom and have real applications for learning, but I didn't think they'd be so excited about getting the garden prepped and getting dirty. Some of the prissiest girls were the ones who were most into it," Sawka mused.

Garden lessons

In December, students prepared the site by smothering grass with cardboard and woodchips. Then, with the first hints of spring last week, it was time for the part the students most looked forward to: planting.

All of the species planted are native to the region, and some, including salmonberry, huckleberry and coastal strawberry, are edible.

"We are planting a water-conscious garden with native plants," Versage said, explaining that the Homewaters Project's mission is to help people understand how to make their activities fit within the limits of natural systems.

The lesson wasn't lost on fourth-grader Kaelah Henderson.

"I learned that some plants can't be planted in this place because if plants get too much shade or water or sun, or not enough, then they'll die," Henderson said while shoveling soil.

Another benefit of the program is that it exposes students who may not have experience with gardening to a new, environmentally friendly hobby, Versage said.

Fourth-grader Garrett Mar said this was his first time working in a garden.

"It's pretty fun. I like talking about plants and planting them," Mar said.

Classmate Jerome Tabin, who doesn't have a place to garden at home because he lives in an apartment, said the project is "cool because you get to do something amazing by making a garden."

The adults involved also looked forward to the more long-term effects of this season's planting.

"We're greening school grounds and building an outdoor classroom future classes can take advantage of," Versage said.

"In spring, when plants are in bloom, I expect students to make connections between their garden and plants in the area. And next year, when they're in fifth grade, they'll see the garden and say, 'This is something we did,'" Sawka said.

Maintaining the garden will be left up to students and teachers. Versage trained Sawka and Jeannie Revello, Kimball's other fourth-grade teacher, at the beginning of the project. She will leave them with instructions on mulching and weeding.

"It's important that our school programs are easy on teachers and require a minimal amount of time," Versage said. "Doing the field work on school grounds makes it even easier."

Five elementary schools applied to participate in the Watershed Gardens project; Summit and Bryant schools were also selected, Versage noted.

For more information about Homewaters Project, visit www.homewatersproject.org.

Denise Miller may be contacted through editor@sdistrictjournal.com.