

The Gardens at North School



The purpose of the garden at North Elementary in Goodland, Kansas is to connect youth with nature while building partnerships and contributing to the community. Leading by example, Karen Nelson has given her time and talents volunteering at the school to improve the garden and create opportunities for the students.

In 2019, Karen got involved with summer school at North. She led an educational series about plant growth with a focus on STEM (science, technology, math, engineering). In 2020, students grew themed gardens in self-watering pots and entered them in the county fair.

Karen learned about the curriculum “Monarchs on the Move” and saw ways to incorporate it into summer school. In 2021, an old greenhouse at the school blew away. A community coalition replaced the greenhouse with the expectation that it would be used to support gardening and outdoor learning at North Elementary.

Karen placed a request to create a pollinator garden as a resource for the students and Extension Master Gardeners (EMGs) in the Sunflower District/Sherman County and the larger community.



Through the Monarch Watch grant, North acquired milkweed plants. Walmart provided additional nectar plants. The EMGs designed and planted the pollinator/butterfly garden and Karen registered the site as a Monarch Wayside Station. 4-H Match day, community donations and the site’s summer school funds made it possible to purchase butterfly hatching supplies. The group expanded the pollinator garden during the winter months to attract a wider range of butterflies.



In 2022, the school garden was integrated into the school day with lessons on habitat, life cycle and the importance of pollinators. Students created stepping stones for the garden and leaders used acquired funds to purchase supplies and educational materials. Though the new greenhouse was intended to be used for starting vegetables, organizers realized there was no electricity to support the grow lights. Establishing electricity is on the to-do list to support continued growth.

In 2023, the Junior Master Gardeners (JMG) and after-school students built self-watering planters and small metal raised planters. During the school year students assisted with garden maintenance such as weeding and mulching. Support from the community continued through financial contributions as well as volunteering to maintain the garden.

Garden Spotlight

Goals for 2024 include continuing to grow the JMG program. Karen plans to learn more about raised bed gardening and companion planting. She intends to improve the watering system for the planters and develop the social media site as well as gain permission and funds to build a pathway to the garden.

Summer care is a challenge for most school gardens, including at North Elementary. Kansas 4-H wrote and received a grant that enabled Sunflower District Extension to hire two educators to support summer education. These educators along with the students, EMGs and Extension staff planted vegetables and additional pollinator plants. They added a drip system, landscape fabric and maintained the garden during summer school. With ground tarp, mulch and raised beds in place, once summer school ends and students leave, a small group of committed volunteers continues maintenance. Karen and the current volunteers plan to establish a “Friends of the Garden” program to maintain a regular rotation of volunteers.



Another challenge is identifying a successor to take on garden leadership. Karen is building a group of leaders to keep the gardens growing beyond her tenure. She welcomes teachers to use the gardens but learned the importance of facilitating this interaction. Teachers are more likely to participate if she gives specific projects such as planting bulbs in the fall.

Though funding is often a challenge for school gardens, grants and donations from the community members have made the gardens at North a success. Garden supporters have taken it upon themselves to seek funding as well. One grandparent of a student gardener contacted businesses and collected almost \$1,500 in donations for garden equipment.



Students enjoy sharing what they learn through the garden. They thrive watching the daily changes including observing the caterpillars forming chrysalises. The garden group set up the iPad and captured video of one butterfly emerging. Students have enjoyed participating in the garden work and are proud of their efforts.

When asked how she finds the time to devote so much of herself to the garden Karen replied with: “It’s therapeutic for me. I consider much of it my volunteer time to the community. I love the people who work there and truly LOVE my time in the garden.”

Do you know a gardener with a story to tell? We’d love to share their gardening experience through the K-State Hort Newsletter Garden Spotlight. Email cdom@ksu.edu to help us grow together.

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