

## Grants Fund Schoolyard Gardens, Fitness Trail

# E.J. School Students Digging, Learning in the Dirt

The third-graders at Ethel A. Jacobsen School were more than happy to get their hands dirty planting beach plum bushes, black-eyed Susans, New England asters, purple coneflowers and more as they helped establish rain gardens on the west and north sides of their school building at the end of May.

"They love getting outside," said school nurse Bianca Aniski, who wrote various grant proposals that enabled the creation of the two rain gardens, a vegetable garden and a fitness trail, all components of a project born out on the school property in Surf City.

A Healthy Community Development mini-grant award in 2009 allowed for the installation of a sustainable, edible garden designed to help underline the importance of fruit and vegetable consumption and to allow for cross-curricular, plant-based education.

Students with autism in the Project ASPIRE program at Southern Regional High School weeded and watered the garden all last summer with the help of special services teacher Heather Kovacs-Schroek. Earlier this year, the E.J. School received a 2011 Innovation in Special Education Award from the New Jersey School Boards Association for the garden. "Our program was selected as an example of successful and creative efforts that enable special needs students to achieve their potential," Aniski wrote on the E.J. School web site devoted to the project.

The timber fitness cluster on the north side of the school, meanwhile, was funded by another Healthy Community Development mini-grant, in October 2010. The fit trail is a cluster of scientifically designed exercise stations – each with an instructional, illustrated sign – that unite with walking or jogging to provide a well-balanced physical fitness routine for the entire body.

"When combining the fitness clusters with our school gardens,



Angela Contillo Andersen

**GOING GREEN:** Third-graders at Ethel A. Jacobsen School help plant a rain garden on the school grounds in Surf City. Grants funded the establishment of two rain gardens, a vegetable garden and a fitness trail.

we plan to create a school and community environment that supports healthy eating and active living," the web site reads. "The fitness clusters will have the potential to create a venue for our community to come together to improve physical activity."

Also in 2010, E.J. was awarded a \$2,500 Go Green Grant from OceanFirst Foundation, which was looking for ideas and strategies focused on teaching and engaging students in "green" hands-on projects and programs.

The science committee of the Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts and Sciences, in Loveladies, sent a letter of support for the grant initiative, and later funded the planting to incorporate into an e-library. "We are happy to help establish rain gardens on the Island and promote the concepts," said science com-

mittee co-chair Angela Contillo Andersen.

The rain gardens facilitated by this grant, said Aniski, not only beautify the school property, but are designed as bird and butterfly habitat, and, in addition, "the gardens are supposed to be intercepting and treating the rainwater that runs off the roof before it gets to the bay," a lesson that ties into the third-grade curriculum taught by Joan Carney.

In November, members of Rutgers University's Water Resource Program presented "Stormwater Management in Your Schoolyard" for the E.J. third-graders. Then, last month, Rutgers' Army Boyajian, Ben Pearson and Caitrin Higgins visited the school to help the students install the rain gardens. Other members of the Water Resource Program also worked side by side with E.J. cus-

todians to excavate the garden sites prior to planting.

And, after all the dirt was washed from little hands, E.J. Internet technology specialist Shelley Smith even helped the kids create a PowerPoint presentation about the plants selected for the garden, so the lesson could also incorporate technology.

"This project has the ability to reach throughout the community to parents and adult decision-makers to foster and improve environmental awareness and create a cleaner habitat," explained Aniski, who is now writing another grant proposal to hopefully fund a cantilevered shade structure for the picnic-table area near one of the gardens – "the last phase," she said, of a wonderfully green and dirty project.

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