

Alcona Community Schools Starting a Garden

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LINCOLN - Alcona Community Schools teachers and students are in the process of planning a garden and want to collaborate with organizations or individuals to make it a project that involves community members.

According to Brian Matchett, agriscience teacher, the concept of a community garden initially began with an employee at Alcona Health Center about three years ago. Some of the Alcona FFA chapter members were involved with the initial project to help with its success, but the garden didn't continue to run after a while. During the fall of 2010, some of the FFA members became interested in bringing the garden back and started doing work through the agriscience program.

The idea expanded outside of the agriscience program after Matchett talked with Valorie Haneckow, a Title I teacher. Haneckow had attended training over the summer for the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative. Being a Title I teacher, she didn't have her own class to develop a project, and her conversations with Matchett sparked an interest in the garden project. She decided to take the lead on the garden and is sort of acting as its project manager, she said.

"The garden was just a great connection between our schools here in Alcona," Matchett said. "We as an agriscience (program) have lots of different projects that we do. I was hesitant to take on another project."

Haneckow said a group of students and about eight teachers have been meeting to develop the garden's concept. Brandon Schroeder, Michigan Sea Grant extension educator, said they have been receiving some technical assistance from Scott Purdy, an AmeriCorps member working with the stewardship initiative. The group also has received some seed money from the initiative to support its time in the planning process. It may be eligible to apply for up to \$6,000 in grant funding through the stewardship initiative because it has the potential to be the type of place-based education opportunity the initiative is designed to support.

"Our goal is that we want to support this project ... whether or not they apply or receive this funding in April," Schroeder said.

Schroeder said the initiative already is invested in Alcona schools through Matchett and his class at the high school. There are a couple of stewardship projects across the stewardship initiative's coverage area that involve composting, schoolyard habitat or schoolyard gardens. The Alcona teachers have access to other teachers in Northeast Michigan who are doing similar things.

The project also has received monetary support through Matchett's and students' FFA connections. In February, they received notice they had been awarded a \$2,000 Live to Serve grant through the National FFA Organization and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Matchett said.

Alcona FFA President Sam Allen, who was involved with applying for the grant, said it will be used to get the garden started. They will buy fencing to keep animals out and get seed starters with the money.

The planning group has been discussing what the concept of the garden will be. The members have decided to pursue a victory garden theme.

"One of the outcomes we hope to have with the history connection and the victory garden connection is to have produce we present to the veterans," Haneckow said.

Ashlie O'Connor, middle/high school social studies teacher, and students in her U.S. history and geography class have studied victory gardens. Victoria Ankner, a sophomore in O'Connor's class, said in the past, people used seed packets and planted them in victory gardens. They helped the entire community and produced more fruits and vegetables for them.

"In our standpoint, that's what we're going to be kind of doing for the community to help out the schools and everything," she said.

In addition to having a history connection, the garden offers a chance to tie in several different school curriculums. For example, middle school math could work on measurements for fencing and plant depths. Elementary students could study the life cycle of the plant, and art students could work on the landscaping aspect. Students studying science also could cover composting and decomposition, Haneckow said.

"It scares me, the possibility of how big it could be," she said.

Haneckow said the planning group is trying to identify partners to tie in the community aspect. They are inviting organizations such as the Harrisville and Lincoln Lions, Veterans of Foreign Wars posts, the Alcona Health Center, Michigan State University Extension and MSU Extension master gardeners.

"We want to have a schedule where a partner or this group of students will come weekly or several times a week, whatever it takes," she said.

Allen said they're not sure what plants they will start with yet, but they have a goal to start the garden quickly.

"We want to start some of the plants indoors, like with classrooms starting ... this spring and getting out and planting them as soon as the weather is nice enough," she said.

These types of learning projects are invaluable from a teacher's perspective because they reinforce the skills they want students to learn, Haneckow said. Allen believes this gives students more incentive to work harder in their classes because it's something they can be proud of later on, she said.

"If it lasts a long time, hopefully they can come back after college and say, 'Hey I helped with this garden,'" Allen said.

Ankner said she is looking forward to it because the project is a chance for students to get out of the classroom. It also could bring them closer together because it's a big project.

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