

Woodville Elementary, Florida A&M team up to create learning garden

BY IRICKA BERLINGER • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 23, 2009

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What better way to learn about nature than to be surrounded by it?

ADVERTISEMENT Woodville Elementary students have this opportunity just steps from the front of the school in the outdoor classroom built and designed by Florida A&M University professor Matthew Powers and his students of FAMU's Master of Landscape Architecture Program.

Kindergarten teacher Jeanette Villa took advantage of a space veiled in wildflowers to teach about why living things need food to live.

Students worked at the picnic tables in the gardens to cover pinecones with peanut butter and birdseed and hung their projects for the birds and squirrels to enjoy.

"It's great to get them outside of the classroom and even better on a nice day like this," said Villa, who tries to use the gardens to teach at least once a week.

The project was made possible by a grant of \$21,250 awarded by the Florida Wildflower Foundation to the FAMU students in 2008.

The transformation of the bland sidewalk flanked with grass to the luscious garden that it is now has taken place over the course of the past year.

"Because it is a garden, and always growing, it is never finished," Powers said, who has plans to add a small pond, a wooden train and more flowers in the upcoming months.

The majority of the grant money was used for plant materials, construction and some labor, explained Powers.

The design of the space came from his students who worked with teachers and students from Woodville to figure out their wants and needs.

The low maintenance of the garden was part of the design. Wildflowers, native to Florida, are drought resistant and need little pruning, said Powers. Small pebbles also cover the ground, so there is no need to mow.

Teachers have found innovative ways to use the gardens and incorporate them into their lessons, Principal Nancy Stokely said.

The art teacher has students sketch the flowers or students read on the many benches scattered throughout the garden.

"It is a learning landscape," Powers said. "Students learn from it, and it helps them learn."



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Jeanete Villa helps kindergarten students begin to work on their bird feeders which were hung in the Wildflower Garden. Woodville Elementary has partnered with FAMU's Architecture School to create outdoor classrooms and nature observation areas around the garden. At right, Caitlyn Carroll eats some peanut butter intended for her pinecone bird feeder on Tuesday. (Reid Compton/Democrat)



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