

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

FEBRUARY 2008

FOUR DOLLARS



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SAME AS
I-A

About the Cover: Snow geese (*Chen caerulescens*) are found throughout Virginia's coastal region. Fall migration brings thousands of snow geese to the Chesapeake Bay from October to December. Snow geese prefer abundant emergent vegetation in brackish marshes and feed on them in early morning or late afternoon. Chincoteague NWR, Saxis WMA and Back Bay NWR are excellent locations to view snow geese in large numbers during their winter migrations. Photo by Ken Conger, kenconger.smugmug.com

VIRGINIA WILDLIFE

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*Above: Friendship and literary connections grow together in the garden.
Right: Capturing nature's shapes and textures takes concentration.*

story and photos
by Gail Brown

Calling all parents—and friends and relatives, too! Three years ago Mount Vernon Elementary School (MVES) in York County flashed the alarm calling families and friends to school to help create a learning garden and wildlife habitat. While long the dream of former principal Jane Allen-Houk, turning dreams into reality can be a challenge. But MVES is the home of Wildfire the Mustang and several Master Gardeners are also called Mom. So, if wishes were horses, then parents (led by Master Gardener Claire Britcher) could ride into campus—garden hoses like lassos waving overhead—and turn the schoolyard into a verdant wonderland. Instantly!

But while everyone might wish things could go that easily, Mustang Meadows, a learning center comprised of small gardens and two main outdoor classrooms, is growing more like a hometown than a boom town. And while there are no horses, real ones anyway, and the garden will always be a work in progress, it's amazing what has transpired in Mount Vernon's Mustang Meadows because moms and dads heard the call, picked up their rakes, and made up their minds that there is great value to experiencing nature first-hand.

Like many things worth working for, success did not come easily, and in the beginning Mount Vernon's schoolyard garden appeared to



eadows



Parents and friends are helping Mount Vernon Elementary School create more than just wild spaces for the students.

sprout more problems than plants. Delays in the school's roofing project (postponed in 2005 and again in 2006) played havoc with plans to create several small gardens designed to border the building, an area deemed off-limits for safety reasons.

"The key," says volunteer Master Gardener Jody Turner, "is to have a complete plan from the start, but start small. And stay flexible." That advice was tested immediately as The Chuck Wagon Vegetable Garden, The Medicine Hat Herb Garden (a collection of herbs which will grow in poor soil), and The ABC Corral (groupings

of plants to be labeled with student-decorated wooden letters) had to be put on hold as their planned location fell within the off-limit area.

But serendipity was in the air that fall as the York County Master Gardeners (under the auspices of the Virginia Cooperative Extension of York County and its 4-H Youth Programs) already had plans to start a 4-H Junior Master Gardener Program at Mount Vernon and two other elementary schools. The Junior Master Gardener clubs (www.jmgkids.com) are led by trained volunteers dedicated to providing children with experi-



Above: Responsibility for keeping the bird feeders full is a privilege.

ences in horticulture that promote leadership skills, a love of nature, and a dedication to preserving our natural resources.

At the same time the kids were moving forward with their projects, Britcher's newly formed Leadership Team of Master Gardeners (and those studying for endorsement) continued to recruit parents. Classes such as the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' WILD School Sites, Project Wet, Project Wild, and Project Learning Tree were attended by Master Gardeners and others wanting to learn how they could help make this dream a reality.

Left: This teepee in the Native American Celebration Garden will support the Three Sisters: corn, beans and squash.



Schoolyard Habitats As Outdoor Classrooms

Regional Schoolyard Habitat workshops are offered by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries for teachers, Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, and others. Workshops focus on:

How to improve a wildlife habitat.

How to plan an Outdoor Classroom.

How to develop objectives that connect habitat features with the Virginia Standards of Learning.

For more information about setting up a Schoolyard Habitat Workshop in your area, call: Carol A. Heiser, Habitat Education Coordinator (DGIF), (804) 367-6989 or Carol.Heiser@dgif.virginia.gov



Above: This “barn,” donated by the PTA, keeps tools and reference materials handy.



Above: Teamwork and muscle help get the job done.

Help also came that fall when Mount Vernon’s generous PTA donated \$2,000 (as they have each year since) and numerous volunteer hours. Several family workdays have been held and, among other accom-

plishments, a dwarf holly hedge was planted across the front of the garden as well as hedges of camellias around the garden’s two classrooms. When grown, the holly hedge will help provide security and muffle street noises; the camellias will provide interior walls so that several classrooms can use the garden simultaneously. Par-

ents even created two additional gardens, The Prairie and The Reading Roundup (think log benches around a campfire of orange, red and yellow flowers).

Providing access for the entire population is an ongoing consideration, and parents Phil Jones, Mic Platt, and others continue to work to make the different areas of the gardens accessible to all. Jones added metal grips to the sides of two raised flower beds, creating a design that allows students with disabilities to pull themselves up to a sitting or standing position to work at the beds. Platt, now the Project Manager, built a ramp to the shed where tools and educational materials are stored. He is currently installing brick landings around two raised beds, which will make it easier to navigate around the beds on crutches or in wheelchairs. “Planning ahead and having time to think things out, getting plenty of help, and letting everyone know what you’re doing makes all the difference,” said Jones.

While kids grow their green thumbs outside, attention is also focused on growing a literary connection inside in the school library. Named Wildfire’s Book Nook by student vote, this collection of books and reference materials serves as a teacher/student center for further study. Linking the gardens with printed materials ensures academic



ference in their school and their community.

As Mustang Meadows enters its fourth year, it's getting harder and harder to remember a time when the kids at Mount Vernon didn't have this natural habitat area to learn in and enjoy. In the words of Principal Barbara Wood, "Mustang Meadows is an extension of Mount Vernon Elementary School, which brings together the parents, students, staff and community to better appreciate plants, wildlife and the rewards of working together to produce a beautiful place to work and learn."

Somewhere kids are looking out a schoolroom window, wishing they could dig in the dirt and check out the worms. And somewhere other parents wish their kids had an outdoor classroom where conservation is learned by testing soil and watching nature unfold her secrets. Now, where'd you say you left that rake? □

Gail Brown is a retired principal for Chesterfield County Public Schools. She is a lifelong learner and educator, and her teaching and administrative experiences in grades K-12 have taught her that project-based environmental programs teach science standards, promote core values, and provide exciting educational experiences for the entire community.



Above: The York County Beautification Committee funds the recycling program and donated this Liberty elm tree.



Top: Smiles grow in the garden, too.

Above: By working together students build a "campfire" of red, yellow and orange plants in the Reading Roundup classroom.

goals are met and that the gardens are seen as learning environments, in addition to beautiful places to visit.

As time passes opportunities become available for teachers and students alike at MVES. Two new 4-H clubs, The Early Birds, a before-school program in place since 2005, and The Schoolyard Scouts, an after-school club begun this fall, provide time for students to work together as leaders in the school's efforts to conserve our natural resources. Currently both groups are working on decorating recycling bins for the office and every classroom. Motivation is high and these kids are making a real dif-