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FEATURED

Templeton students get down and dirty to learn about native plants

By Brittani Howell 812-331-4243 | bhowell@heraldt.com 10 hrs ago



Luna Crespo, right, removes a native plant from its pot before planting it as Rhianna Russell digs a hole Sept. 7 in the garden at Templeton Elementary School.

Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

Rhianna Russell shouted in triumph on a sunny afternoon in the children's garden at Templeton Elementary School. After several minutes of trying to get a young plant out of its plastic container, she finally slid it out of its temporary pot and into a hole she had dug.

"I got it, I got it!" she cried to her classmates, and then sang a "Hallelujah" straight out of Handel's "Messiah."

Those are the moments that Shane Gibson, education director of Sycamore Land Trust, loves to hear. Rhianna and a small group of classmates were up to their elbows in mulch and soil earlier this month, helping Gibson beautify the grounds of their school.

Gibson has been working on the grounds of Templeton since last October, when Sycamore Land Trust received nearly \$10,000 from Duke Energy for a "native plant" project. He worked with Templeton's custodian supervisor, Tyler McKinney, to prepare and maintain the beds over the winter, and with Eco Logic LLC to plan out the landscaping.

Under his direction, students at Templeton and at Arlington Heights Elementary School have laid down cardboard to kill weeds, put out mulch, placed young plants in the ground and revisited them to water and weed the beds. Last spring, some of the students helped plant native grasses in a circular island in Templeton's back parking lot; now, as summer wanes to fall, those plants stand a little taller and a little fuller, thanks to the care they have received.

As Gibson explained to his young assistant gardeners, a native plant is one that grows naturally in Indiana — not in another area of the country with a different climate, and not in another country entirely. Not only can those plants be beautiful in your yard, he said, but they provide habitat and food sources to local wildlife, from birds to insects and even to mammals, including the deer and rabbits that occasionally nibble in the garden in the early morning when no one is around.

Working with plants gives the students a chance to have hands-on encounters with the food web and nature lessons they learn in class.

"You are putting the habitat into action: the things you talked about, the things animals need to survive," Gibson said.

Gibson has worked with several teachers at Templeton to get classes into the garden and down in the dirt. On a recent Thursday, students from Templeton's multi-age classrooms helped plant a row of lance-fruited sedge along the fence that borders Henderson Street. Kevin Gallagher, a third- and fourth-grade teacher, said the kids enjoy seeing the changes the garden has gone through from season to season.

"I think it raises awareness about the environment, number one," he said. The garden project also helps promote what he called students' "soft skills": After a session out in the garden, students are asked to reflect on their experience by writing and drawing about what they did that day. They research the plants they have planted and the wildlife they expect to see in the garden, and present their findings and their reflections to the rest of the class.

And above all, Gallagher said, it's fun. The kids love getting out in the garden, and they feel so proud when they look back at the things they planted last year to see how much they have grown. When the garden is mature, it will be a beautiful spot for students to read, sketch or just sit still.

"I think these experiences, they'll remember for the rest of their lives," Gallagher said.



Rhianna Russell removes a native plant from its plastic pot before planting it Sept. 7 in the garden at Templeton Elementary School in Bloomington.

Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times



Rhianna Russell, left, and Alexis Wiesenberg plant native plants at Templeton Elementary School.

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Gibson's main goal, in addition to preaching the importance of native plants and beautifying local schools, is to connect children to the outdoors and instill a love of nature. It was amazing to see how quickly that worked.

"Some of these kids loved it," he said of the early days of working in the garden. "It was amazing how much they loved using the tools and climbing on the mulch pile to shovel, and use the wheelbarrow."

Rhianna, for instance, loves to see how much the plants she has helped put in the ground have grown. Whenever she transfers a seedling from its plastic pot to the garden, tenderly patting down the soil, she feels like she has accomplished something.

"It will make our garden look really, really nice," she said.

Her classmate Alexis Wiesenberg agreed.

"It's just fun to know we're helping the environment," she said.

Brittani Howell

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