

## Harwich Elementary School Garden Club Shines

Education is such a vital part of this country's success. Reading, writing and arithmetic are still the staples in every school's curriculum. That has not changed, but the variety of afterschool activities has expanded thanks to motivated faculty and willing parents. I'm 44, and when I was in elementary school in the '80s, after school programs revolved around sports. Times have changed and so have the variety of opportunities for students of all ages. These programs are excellent tools to get everyone involved and excited in learning.

One such program that I was made aware of is the Harwich Elementary School Garden Club. Technology specialist teacher Elizabeth Hoff has taken the bull by the horns, thought outside the box and has created an exciting and appealing after school program for Harwich Elementary students from both second and third grades. Hoff loves to garden and has focused her after-school attention on this project.

I had the great pleasure of meeting with Hoff and her garden club students at the Harwich Elementary School courtyard garden. The courtyard has become Hoff and the students' canvas carving out just a gorgeous spot. What was once overgrown and weedy has been turned into a little slice of heaven. The children have actively created some great garden spaces and refreshed other areas that had been overgrown. There's even a new metal



Elizabeth Hoff and the Harwich Elementary School Garden Club. MELISSA DE LA VEGA PHOTOS

raised bed that's been planted by the Girl Scouts. Over the course of the spring, Hoff has taught her garden club students how and what to weed, how to properly plant in some great reclaimed raised garden beds and how to maintain the plants through watering.

"The goal was to make a sensory garden.

A little bit of everything, including sight, sound, taste and touch," Hoff said. "First we had to clean out the beds. They were in really bad shape. So every single one of the students pulled all the weeds." It was a massive undertaking, but you can tell how passionate the children are about making this courtyard special. They've



The water chain is a huge hit with the Garden Club!

done a fantastic job.

In the gardens you'll find flowers, fruit, veggies and even an herb garden. They meet twice a week and have handwritten signs labeling a lot of the plants. I was escorted around by the group as they emphatically showed me all of the different plants they've sunk into the ground. It's

# For Gardening

by Justin Alex



The students did a fabulous job cleaning up this established bed.

Landscaping and Design," she said. "Three of the kids' parents own it and they've been a huge help. The Garden Club of Harwich has been instrumental in the project as well. It's really a community effort all around. The Garden Club of Harwich is super invested in what we have done here. We could not have done this without volunteers."

When asked who will take care of the gardens when the school lets out in the summer, Hoff said that there is a special needs program that takes place over the summer at the school and teachers will use the garden as a learning opportunity for the students.

"We are going to integrate some sort of curricular connection associated with their IEP (Individualized Education Program)," Hoff said. Some of them are working on gross motor skills and learning how to squeeze. Watering plants using a garden hose will help them work on how to squeeze the nozzle and aim the water towards the plant, helping with fine motor skills, she said.

The excitement from the children was infectious. They were eager and passionate to show off their garden creations. Plans for future projects and uses had the students listing some of the fantastic opportunities the revitalized courtyard can provide. From reading nooks in shaded areas of the space to outdoor class activities, the possibilities are endless.

As we were going over the different gardens, the door opened and the science teacher brought his class out into the courtyard to try and find some birds enjoying the beautiful space. It's so obvious just from the kids' faces how excited and focused they were to learn. Sure, indoor classroom's are the norm, but having opportunities to bring your classroom outside just gives me the feeling these nature spaces will be a fantastic learning tool now and into the future.

Thanks to Elizabeth Hoff and the members of the Harwich Elementary School for really caring and valuing their students' education. Making it fun, but also giving them the best conditions and situations to learn. We are so fortunate to have teachers like Elizabeth Hoff. Well done!



Signs that the students have used to label certain plants.

really a cool space, considering it's completely enclosed by the building so there is no access to the outside, meaning no squirrels to take bird food from the bird feeders or rabbits to eat beautiful perennials. But more importantly, the kids are in a safe controlled area. One of the exciting things they wanted to show me was the water chain that hangs from the birdhouse post. When they put water in the chain, it cascades down into a colorful bowl that was painted by the students. I then was shown the worm farm. You've got to love what makes kids excited!

This project also has had a bunch of volunteers and donors, including Agway of Cape Cod, Hart Farm, Matt's Organic Gardens, Rob Mador, Robert B. Our Company Inc., Bird Watcher's General Store, Wild Birds Unlimited, Wind River Chimes, Grow Organic, Adaptive Seeds, Nurture and Nature Seeds, Fedco Seeds, Monomoy Regional School District, Harwich Elementary School administration, faculty, and staff, The families of the Harwich Elementary School Garden Club, Harwich Elementary PTO, the Turco Family and of course Girl Scouts troop 77477.

Hoff added some of the biggest helpers were Eventide Landscaping and Design and The Garden Club of Harwich.

"I do have to give props to Eventide

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