

Sharing the Success of Good Stewardship

A successful effort to create environmental education opportunities right in a school's backyard.

by CHRIS PEKAREK

In 1992, Village Links at Glen Ellyn, in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, was the seventh golf course in the nation to achieve certification through the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses (ACSP). As part of their ongoing participation in the ACSP, golf course staff have reached well beyond the boundaries of the course. In 1995, they developed a Backyard Wildlife Program to help community residents integrate wildlife habitat into their own backyards, and later that year they began working with local elementary schools to share their expertise on wildlife and habitat enhancement.

TAKE A look at most elementary schools and you will see familiar expanses of grass and parking lots that surround school buildings. While these hold up especially well with the constant trampling of energetic youngsters, a typical schoolyard is rarely a landscape for learning. In fact, schools frequently pay hundreds of dollars each year to transport students to nature centers and other sites where they can engage in hands-on scientific investigation. But what if kids could find a dynamic natural environment right outside the classroom on the school grounds? What if they could participate in transforming part of their school grounds into a sanctuary for wildlife and an exciting place to learn?

In 1995, we began just such a project at Ben Franklin Elementary School in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. As part of our outreach efforts through the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses (ACSP), we adopted the nearby school to share our expertise and help students and teachers reap the many rewards of good environmental stewardship.

Creating a Dynamic Learning Environment

Our project involved planting a butterfly garden and restoring a small

prairie on the school grounds to create two dynamic learning stations. The 400-square-foot butterfly garden was planted with butterfly bush (*Buddleia* sp.), six varieties of native forbs, and five varieties of native grasses. The prairie restoration site was planted with 400 native prairie forbs and grasses covering a 1,000-square-foot site. In addition, observation benches and nest boxes for cavity-nesting birds were installed at both sites.

The butterfly garden and prairie restoration projects replaced 1,400 square feet of mowed turfgrass and broadleaf weeds. Both projects were chosen to provide hands-on learning stations for the kindergarten through fifth-grade students. The two projects helped improve the aesthetics of the school grounds and provided habitat that attracted a variety of birds, butterflies, and other insects.

Project Goals

- Provide hands-on outdoor learning stations at the school.
- Involve the students in the project so they would feel pride in their school.
- Communicate to the students that they can take action that has a positive impact on their environment.
- Demonstrate to the community the importance of educating students about environmental and conservation issues.
- Share the habitat enhancement expertise the golf course has developed as a member of the ACSP for Golf Courses with our adopted school.

From Planning to Planting

The projects were planned in cooperation with two teachers, students of the Very Important Planet Club (the V.I.P. Club is the school's environmental organization), parents, and golf course staff. To raise money for the butterfly garden, the parent/teacher's organization sold shirts, while the golf course raised funds for the prairie site

through an annual plant sale. The golf course supplied all materials through wholesale contacts.

First, the sites were measured and laid out. The sod was stripped using a rented sod cutter. To amend the soil, a 2-inch layer of mushroom compost was spread over the butterfly garden site and rototilled in. In contrast, the prairie site was not amended or rototilled.

Students who belong to the V.I.P. Club planted the butterfly garden. All 600 students of the school turned out to plant the prairie in just one afternoon. To keep it manageable, two classes of approximately 45 students worked on the prairie site at one time. Golf course staff were on site to explain to the students the benefit of native prairies. Teachers assisted the students in planting the potted prairie plants. Both sites were mulched with 3 inches of shredded hardwood mulch to help control weeds and retain moisture. Finally, school maintenance staff installed observation benches and bird nesting boxes at both sites.

The cost of implementing both projects was approximately \$600 (\$200 for the butterfly garden and \$400 for the prairie restoration). However, the projects will actually save money for the school by reducing field trips to offsite locations. (Field trips cost \$300 per trip.)

Rewarding Results

The sites provide hands-on, easily accessible learning stations that enhance the classroom experience by supporting lessons students learn in their curriculum. Very few of the students ever had the chance to view a butterfly garden or native prairie. The school used to take a few dozen students on field trips to a local arboretum to view similar plants. Now all 600 students can view these native plants several times each school year. Everything from studying plant parts to identifying and enhancing habitat for



Ben Franklin Elementary School student body planting prairie site at school.

wildlife can now be learned firsthand, right at school.

Response from the local community is extremely positive and generated a lot of interest. Publicity included a newspaper article on the prairie planting, an award presented to the school by the town officials, and local cable television coverage of the award presentation. As an added benefit, the golf course achieved a new level of standing in the eyes of town residents. Vil-

lage board and recreation commission members comment on the positive aspect of the golf course being involved with the local schools.

One of the most satisfying aspects of our golf course involvement with the school was simply serving as a catalyst for the project and accomplishing something that the school would not have done on its own. What seemed easy to us — planting a butterfly garden and native prairie — was not simple to

the school. Their gratitude and the stewardship lessons we helped create for so many students made the project rewarding for everyone involved.

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