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Weeding, writing and 'rithmetic; Community garden at West Harpswell School serves as outdoor classroom

By Beth Brogan, *The Times Record*

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HARPSWELL - An anonymous donor planted a seed that students at West Harpswell Elementary School have nurtured to the point of fruition.

The \$100,000 gift to the Harpswell Heritage Land Trust last December to start and support community gardens throughout the town led volunteer Sandy Potholm to approach the West Harpswell Elementary School faculty about creating the garden there. According to the trust, the donor wants the gardens to be accessible to disabled people; promote organic gardening practices; and create learning opportunities for Harpswell school children.

Wednesday's warm weather provided the most recent opportunity to turn the Great Outdoors into a classroom. Lennie Mullaney's second grade class planted the first spring bulbs in West Harpswell Elementary School's community gardens, moving the

town's first community garden one step closer to fruition.

Mullaney has spearheaded the effort. Her students started brainstorming about the garden in September, poring over gardening books and creating a giant mural of their dream garden, made of torn colored paper and paint. The mural was displayed during the school's open house and still hangs outside Mullaney's classroom.

As her students gathered in a circle Wednesday afternoon, Mullaney held up a bag of bulbs.

"These are daffodils. They have to go down about 6 inches. Crocuses go down 3 inches. What's 3 + 3? Six, good! So daffodils go down twice as deep as the crocuses."

The students lined up along the rectangular Impressionist Garden, which will include flowers similar to those in paintings by Monet and Manet. Second-grader Marilyn Daniel, trowel in hand, said, "In the summer, I'll come here and paint."

In all, there are five gardens, each a different geometric shape. One is a "pizza garden," in which students will plant ingredients and then harvest and make pizzas, Mullaney said.

Music teacher Allison Chapman will use gourds from the Native American garden to create musical instruments.

"I think this is authentic learning," Mullaney said. "To me, that means learning a true life skill. They cooperate, have successes and failures, and the end result is a life skill."

Mikaila Cloutier, 7, helped with the budget because, "I knew how to count money. We spent \$50, but \$200 is what we have altogether."

Students also hope to install instruments to measure rainfall and snowfall, as well as a weathervane. Mullaney said her second-graders have already gathered around a newly installed garden compass, moving their arms in the directions of north, south, east and west like the compass.

Mullaney plans to order seed catalogs during the winter, to let students learn about planning and patience. In the spring, they will start seeds in a sunny window to watch the roots grow, and also will study nutrition based on garden produce. She hopes the garden would become a place classes can go outdoors to study botany and habitat, as well as poetry reading, art and music.

Dr. Jeffrey Slocum, father of second-grader Isabella, was on hand Wednesday to loosen the soil. He thinks the gardens will allow students to see that "hard work over time" pays off.

"You don't always realize a direct benefit," Slocum said. "But over time, planting a seed and nurturing it, you'll realize its future potential."

Students also have learned about writing, penning thank-you notes to Reed Coles, executive director of the trust, and Fred Kenney, a grandparent to several West Harpswell students, who put in the gardens during the summer.

Mullaney said the students were thrilled to receive letters in return.

"They were so cute, I had to reply," Coles said.

A similar garden is anticipated at Harpswell Islands School, Potholm said. "They're excited after learning about what we've done over here."

Coles said the role of the trust is to get the community gardens up and running. Community members, or in this case, students and teachers, will have to operate the gardens.

"The school is where we're starting," Coles said, "but we will try to organize spring and winter community gardens as well."

Coles said any Harpswell gardeners interested in starting a community garden can contact the trust by calling 833-5566 or by e-mailing info@hhlmaine.org. The Harpswell Heritage Land Trust Web site is www.hhlmaine.org.

