

# Atwood Elementary Gator Gardens

Atwood Elementary School, Macomb, Michigan

*Summary: Outdoor classroom with theme based gardening; field trips on school grounds; Wildlife Habitat; Michigan Junior Master Gardener Program; Feed the Hungry; Native Gardening – environmental sustainability; traditional outdoor composting, as well as vermicomposting in classrooms.*

A Brownie Troop who planted bulbs in the fall of 2005 initially inspired Atwood Elementary



School Gardens. The school Principal was so excited about the potential of the bulbs, she encouraged the youth to expand the gardens. Planning occurred over the winter months, with our first after-school meetings occurring in the spring of 2006.

Each week from February to November, the Gator Gardeners meet. We start with the Michigan Junior Master Gardener Course, followed by planning and planting our gardens, summer care and harvesting, and then follow up with putting our gardens to bed for the

winter. Atwood teachers take their students to the gardens for many lessons. Often times, our Junior Master Gardeners will teach their fellow students about the gardens, helping the gardeners to build self-esteem and public speaking skills. The students pay close attention to their classmate leaders and are eager to hear about the gardens. The National Wildlife Federation certified our gardens as a Wildlife Habitat. Our 750 students love the opportunity to explore the gardens during recess, class time and even return after school to share it with their families.

Our harvest is donated to our local soup kitchen, The Well Church. The Well prepares community meals twice a week, for 60 – 80 people. They are very eager for our fresh herbs and vegetables! Some weeks have found the kitchen with no fresh produce, except for what we have donated. The gardeners learn a valuable lesson about caring for their community members.



This recently inspired one gardener to use half her birthday money to purchase pantry items that the kitchen was in need of!



The youth gardeners created several gardens the first spring, including a Butterfly Garden, Tee Pee Garden, Victory Garden, a Maze Garden and a Red, White, Blue ~ We Salute You Garden. Over the last several years, we have added more Victory Gardens, a Monarch Way Station, two Native Gardens, an ABC Garden, and a Sunflower House.

Our newest addition in 2009 was a 20' x 40' Native Educational Demonstration Maze Garden, with an emphasis on protecting the Great Lakes Watershed. This garden was partially funded by our Disney grant, which encouraged youth leadership. Our Middle School Mentors applied for the grant, researched plant choices, assisted in the garden design, and led the workers on Global Youth Service Day, 2009. Our Native Gardens have assisted our school to receive Michigan Green School Designation in 2009.

Several grants have helped us to grow our gardens each year. Grant funding has come to us from a wide variety of sources: National Gardening Association and Home Depot; L'Anse Creuse Foundation; Lowe's Toolbox for Education; Youth Service America and Disney. The grants awarded have ranged from \$300 to \$5000. This funding, on top of our several fundraisers held each year have allowed us to build and plant 14 different beds.

The Atwood Gator Gardeners work hand in hand with our Middle School and our High School's Agri-Science class. The Middle School provides mentors who are previous Gator Gardeners and Michigan Junior Master Gardeners. The mentors return to the Gator Gardeners to teach gardening and assist the adult leaders. The High School has an active Future Farmers of America program with a greenhouse. The FFA members grow and tend many of the plants that the Gator Gardeners use in their projects. The Gator Garden adults volunteer in many K-5 classrooms to teach garden related topics that cover educational benchmarks such as the pumpkin life cycle, decomposition, worm composting, edible insects, plant parts and more! All of these programs allow the Gator Gardeners to touch every grade level from Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.



The families of our gardeners report that they have started family vegetable gardening and water wise gardening practices at home, based on what they are learning from their youth gardeners – a sure sign of the success of our program!

