

# Grant made way for Irene-Wakonda students to dig into gardening

by Laurie Fritsch, Program Clerk for USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

The students who took part in the Irene-Wakonda Public Library Summer Reading Program enjoyed books about dreams, wishes, and topics related to what they dream about doing one day, according to

Carla Ostrem, Librarian of the Irene-Wakonda Elementary School. Ostrem, who’s been on staff since 2005, said “Dream Big . . . Read” was the theme for this year’s four-week program held each Tuesday morning in June. Ostrem and the students were able to take part in a new gardening series this year made possible

\$125.00 from South Dakota State University, secured by featured guest Grace Freeman, Vermillion, SD, a local Master Gardener and landowner. Freeman said, “This grant was a perfect fit because the school recently put up a 20-ft. x 24-ft. unheated Hoop House. Funds from the mini-grant were used to purchase supplies to

series activities, some of which we completed in the Hoop House for the Library’s reading program.” Ostrem scheduled up to two-hours of student activities with time for Freeman to complete a garden lesson each week. Ostrem explained, “Sometimes I run of out time. I often have more ideas than what we have time to finish.” Each Tuesday, Ostrem started off the morning reading a story to the kids, followed by a few minutes to make a craft related to the story. This year the students made Dream Catchers, Dream Jars and the like. Next they enjoyed a snack break before they spent time to look for a book or two to take home to read during the week. “If students brought their books back each week they were granted a trip to my Treasure Box to pick out a prize.”

As Freeman introduced kids to gardening, their first lesson covered soil. Freeman asked students, “Is there air in soil? To find out, first Freeman had them split up into seven small groups. Each group put a cup of boiled water that had cooled, plus one cup of garden soil into a quart-sized jar. The experiment proved successful as they witnessed the answer for themselves. Freeman said, “The kids observed air bubbles rising from the soil.” Then Freeman asked students, “Do bugs live in the soil?” To find out, each team put soil in a 6-oz. container. Several minutes later the students discovered very active little critters in the soil.

To wrap up the first lesson, they covered how plants grow from healthy soil, and how worms make compost when they digest food scraps. Students also created worm composters to take home using Red Wiggler Worms purchased from Jim’s Worm Farm at <http://unclejimswormfarm.com>. Freeman referenced several books to prepare for this session. One she bought with grant funds and donated to the I-W Elementary School Library was Mary Appelhof’s book, “Worms Eat My Garbage.” Lesson Two focused on plant health through root development. Each student placed gel balls and a rooting plant into a clear glass. Once home they filled the



The Wakonda Park, Wakonda, SD, made the perfect setting for Jeff Loof, District Conservationist of Clay and Union County USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service field offices in Vermillion and Elk Point, SD, to talk to students in the Irene-Wakonda Summer Reading Program, about soil health and the work of earthworms do to keep soil fertile. Grace Freeman, Master Gardener and local landowner, standing behind Loof with her camera, helped secure a grant from South Dakota State University, Brookings, SD, to present a new four-part gardening series for this year’s reading program.

(photo by Laurie Fritsch, Program Clerk for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Vermillion, SD)

glass with water and were able to notice as the root system developed. In addition, the kids created an environment to observe root growth by putting gel beads into a glass cup, and placed plant cuttings into the cup. Freeman encouraged students to work up a garden at home. To get them started, each family represented received seed packets donated by the State Library Military Garden Project.

During the third lesson students covered the sights, smells and tastes of the garden. Freeman said, “A ‘Tea Pot’ filled with plants used in making tea including Lemongrass, Mint, Chamomile, and Stevia, was donated to the school. The kids smelled and chewed on the various leaves to see what they tasted like. Next those interested drank Iced Tea made with herbs. Asparagus Ferns were also available for the kids to feel and discuss. They were invited to eat freshly steamed Asparagus that Freeman prepared. Ostrem said, “The kids that like Asparagus just loved it.” This fall, the Asparagus will be planted in the school’s garden. For the last session of the garden series, Jeff Loof, District Conservationist of Clay and Union County USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service field offices in Vermillion and Elk Point, SD, met Freeman and the students at the Wakonda Park. Other kids at the Park for swimming lessons that day were invited to join in. Loof talked about why it’s important to keep the soil healthy

and the significance of the work that earthworms do. As he spoke, he invited the kids to come up and get a worm to hold. “Earthworms move through soil and break down organic matter like dead plants and animals, animal waste and leaves. We rely on these worms to keep the earth very fertile,” he said. Loof said, “One thing worms don’t like is sunlight. Worm holes sometimes get flooded when it rains, so worms crawl out of the ground and lie on the sidewalk. They’re sensitive to ultraviolet rays. Worms can be hurt from too much sun. If they lay there too long the sunlight can kill them. That’s why they like to stay underground where it’s dark.”

Then he instructed the kids to let their worms go in a shady spot to crawl back into the soil. “Would you like to pretend you’re a worm and check out the Worm Tunnel?” he asked. The kids had anxiously waited for his invitation to do so, and shouted “Yeah!” Responding to their enthusiasm, he said, “It’s time to crawl through the Worm Tunnel!” The kids had a blast taking turns one after the other. But one adventure through the Worm Tunnel just didn’t satisfy. In the final moments as the first-ever gardening series and the summer reading program drew to a close, the kids not only dreamed of what it was like to be a worm, they crawled through the Worm Tunnel to experience it for themselves.

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