

Kid-powered garden at San Jose zoo

STUDENTS CREATE A CRITTER HAVEN

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A little garden of California native plants is taking root at San Jose's Happy Hollow Park and Zoo, thanks to an ambitious group of fifth-graders who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty.

There was a prize involved - a trip to Disneyland - but more on that in a minute.

The students, 10- and 11-year-olds who attend St. Simon School in Los Altos, approached the park earlier this year about starting the garden, which is designed to educate the public about vanishing habitats for small creatures such as toads, lizards, snakes and birds.

The garden was planted last month in a scene of "controlled chaos," according to teacher Marc Ortiz.

"They had so much fun," Ortiz said. "Out of the 34 students in my class, 31 were there that day. I wasn't sure they'd all show up because it was after school. A lot of the parents came, too. It was very rewarding."

In addition to digging in the dirt, the students released earthworms to help aerate the soil and ladybugs to keep garden-defoliating insects at bay.

But before a single trowel dug a single planting hole, there was research to be done.

"The kids wanted a teaching garden, so they had to look up information about animals you'd find in your back yard like frogs and birds, and discover where they live and the type of foods they eat," Ortiz said.

Then, Vanessa Rogier and Shannon Heimer of Happy Hollow went to St. Simon to discuss the types of plants that would be appropriate in the

garden.

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"We talked to them about the benefits of native plants in attracting wildlife and beneficial insects as well as water conservation," said Rogier, who does marketing for the park. They settled on an eclectic list that includes coffeeberry, California fuchsia, coyote bush, sticky monkey flower, yarrow, penstemon and flowering current, among other plants.

Lucky for Ortiz, one of the class parents is a landscape professional. Stephen Kovacs, who owns Eni-ko Landscaping, donated his time to prep the area for planting. The kids held a pizza-sale fundraiser to cover the project's approximate \$900 budget.

"Stephen also advised us on what plants we should look at," Ortiz said. "We wanted it to be done right."

Doing it "right" also meant instilling in his students the value of giving back to the community. The class will continue to maintain the garden.

"St. Simon is a Catholic school, and a lot of our work has to do with service-based learning," said Ortiz, 30, who has been teaching for four years and is in his first year at St. Simon. He is working on his master's degree in education at Santa Clara University.

He is not a gardener.

"This has been a learning experience for me, too," Ortiz said.

But then he added:

"This project is about more than making a garden. They came together as a team. They did something lasting. They did something greater than just building something for a competition."

Oh, yeah. The competition.

St. Simon was one of about 300 schools in California whose fifth-graders entered a portfolio documenting plans for their project in Disney's Environmental Challenge, which encourages young people to think and act as environmental stewards at school, at home and in their communities.

The program offers teachers a handbook and sample lesson plans that are based on California state teaching standards. A Web site shows examples of prize-winning portfolios from previous contests and suggests ways to engage students in brainstorming about their projects and how they might create something sustainable in their area.

Disney also has issued the challenge to students in Florida, Hong Kong and the Cayman Islands.

The grand prize for California is an all-expenses-paid, two-days-one-night trip to Disneyland, where the winning school team is feted at a "heroes" ceremony and gets to ride in the Main Street parade. Other award levels include cash prizes.

This month, a panel of scientists and educators began evaluating entries based on their environmental relevance, originality and potential for enduring impact. About 40 survived to the next round of judging, and 12 to 15 made it to the finals.

Laurie Monserrat, a research scientist with the California Environmental Protection Agency, has been involved in the Disney program for 12 years and said she's "never seen a project that was cruddy or a waste of time or poorly thought out."

"I've seen everything from simple to ultra-technical," said Monserrat, who added that many of the projects just make her smile, like the year a fifth-grader working on a worm bin insisted on including little windows "so the worms could look out and see the world."

Ortiz was realistic about his class's chances.

"There is a *huge* amount of competition," Ortiz said. "I said to the kids: It would be really nice to win, but we have to be really open to what's going to happen here."

When the winners were announced Thursday, the garden at Happy Hollow was not on the list. The Disneyland trip went to fifth-graders at Phoebe Hearst Elementary in Sacramento. But the big prize, to Ortiz, wasn't the point.

"I want them to keep focused on what they're doing, which is something lasting for the community. They can always go back to the park and see what they made."

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