



# A SCHOOL GARDEN

Students learn from gardening at David Thompson

by Linda Tomlinson

Up until a few years ago, David Thompson—a small rural school about 50 km west of Red Deer on Highway 11—looked like any other 40-year-old school: a building, a few overgrown or badly pruned shrubs, a parking lot and grass. Rarely did anyone give the building a second glance as they drove by.

Things changed in 2000 after custodians Joyce Holman and Sharon Cech joined the staff. Both are avid gardeners and decided to rescue two neglected peonies growing on the east side of the school entrance. With the blessing of the principal, Lee Tipman, they removed the sod from the peonies and made a flowerbed along the east wall.

Holman and Cech added well-rotted manure to the soil and brought in extra perennials from home to fill in the flowerbed the first season. The columbines, perennial bachelor buttons, lupines and achillea did well. Soon the original bed was too narrow and they had to widen it to contain the plants.

Then it became a school project. Mary Anne Veenstra and the students from her life skills class helped the custodians remove the sod from the south wall east of the main entrance and enrich the soil. Veenstra brought in irises, poppies and lilies. Her students started a few bed-

ding plants and grew them under a grow light built by shop teacher Randy Wolitski and his students. The students planted and cared for the flowers until school was out in June. Holman and Cech weeded and watered the beds through July and August, and in September a colorful display greeted all the students as they returned to school. David Thompson has 275 students in Grades 8 to 12, most from farms and acreages, with a few coming from two nearby villages.

Steve Oscar, the science teacher, took over bedding plant production the next year. He provided a positive, hands-on opportunity for the students, while fulfilling the plant section of the science curriculum. The first spring, students successfully grew bedding plants under the existing grow light or by the window. Once again the project was a success, with Oscar, a novice gardener, learning as much as the students.

Each year, the gardens improved. Plans for the next year were underway soon after the first killer frost. The school canvassed the community for a greenhouse, but they couldn't find any that were practical to move or heat. As an alternative they turned the student lounge into a temporary greenhouse. They removed lounge chairs, lowered the fluorescent lights and brought in



tables to put under the lights. As the distance between lights and tables was still too great, buckets and lumber from the school's shop were used to raise the plants to within a few inches of the lights. The room was large enough for 22 students to move around and work on their plants without bumping into each other.

Tipman and Oscar had been in contact with Olds College the previous year and had found them an excellent source of information. In 2001 they accepted an invitation from the college and spent a day of their spring break in Olds collecting ideas and materials to help them improve the science class and ultimately the garden.

Oscar ordered marigolds, nolana, petunias, nicotiana, scabiosa, calendula, snapdragons and sweet peas, keeping in mind the ease of germination and transplanting. The first week in April saw the Grade 8 students seeding plants and taking cuttings. Students read the packages to

determine the plants' germination requirements, then consulted with Oscar and planted them accordingly. Cuttings were taken from geraniums, fuchsia and ivies. Some were placed in water, while others were placed directly in soil.

Students, with Oscar's help, watered, fertilized and transplanted the seedlings into larger containers. They took detailed notes on when the plants germinated and how big they grew. Science class wasn't scheduled for every day, but many of the students checked on their plants at break or after lunch. Student Darren Jans summed up the experience: "The ugly little seedlings I had planted turned into bright, beautiful flowers. It gave me a new look on how I saw plant life."

As it is with all first-time gardeners, mistakes happened. Some plants died due to lack of moisture, and a few seeds refused to germinate; but more plants survived



than initially was expected.

New flowerbed designs were passed among Tipman, Oscar and Wolitski all winter. They wanted a bed that would be easily visible from the highway, showing passing motorists what their students could accomplish. The final design was a triangular raised bed that sloped to the southwest. It is visible from the highway, and it's the first thing visitors see as they enter the parking lot.

One remaining bed was an eyesore—the southwest entrance containing many original shrubs: honeysuckle, lilacs, spirea, roses and elder. Holman and Cech removed the sod from one half, the students the other half. Well-rotted manure from Cech's farm was mixed with the existing soil. The bed was ready by the first of June, when the students set out their bedding plants.

Students helped each other carefully with their planting. Luck was with them: the day after planting, it rained for

the first time in three weeks. Growing bedding plants successfully from seed is not simple, but student Melissa Wolfe found, "It was relaxing and gave a sense of responsibility."

The project was enjoyed by all who took part. Another student, Devon OpdenDries, summed it up best: "It was nice to have the weight of normal classes off our backs and to go outside and plant flowers."

By the end of June when students were writing exams, the bedding plants were blooming, and the perennials planted in previous years were providing a bright, colourful display. When the students came back in the fall, once again they were greeted by the lovely array made possible by the Grade 8s and staff of David Thompson School.

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