



Young minds bloom in school's science garden

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By [Patrick Fox](#), The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Just in time for summer, students at Sharon Elementary School in Suwanee are planting a garden in the campus courtyard.



Johnny Crawford, Jcrawford@ajc.com
States Wing and Jeff Bowling place stones in concrete as they build a stone bench inside the mini-farm classroom at Sharon Elementary School in Suwanee.

And what's growing? Interest, for one.

Students, teachers, parents and local businesses have contributed time, money and supplies to build a unique 15,000-square-foot outdoor science classroom -- a mini-farm -- they hope will be used for generations.

"As we have our volunteer days, the parents that come and participate for a couple of hours, they can't wait to come back," Sharon Elementary principal Amy Bartlett said. "Everything you see out here is based on our curriculum."

The courtyard, once an expanse of spotty grass with dandelions and a few bushes, now features an amphitheater, weatherbug station, 50,000 pounds of boulders and stones for the

study of native geology, native plants, a garden with compost facilities and a shed built of wood reclaimed from old barns. While some metro schools offer plant and natural habitat displays, nothing is nearly as comprehensive.

The area is large enough to hold multiple classes devoted to different subjects, Bartlett said.

Surrounding school districts in Gwinnett, Fulton and Cobb report a number of their schools with outdoor classrooms that focus on natural science, but Sharon Elementary's facility is unique.

Volunteers call the mini-farm DIGS, for discover, inspire, grow, succeed.

"We wanted it to be more than just pretty," said Amy Bowling, a Sharon Elementary teacher who, along with husband Jeff, took the lead on the project about a year ago. "DIGS is ... a testament to what parents dedicated to a quality education for their children can accomplish in light of public school cut-backs."

When the plan first hatched late last year, Jeff Bowling spent much of his time rounding up volunteers, tapping into the local Watchdog Dad program for a list of willing student parents. One of the first recruits was States Wing, a local landscaper, who took the project to heart.

"It's been a group effort with a lot of volunteers," Wing said. "I point a lot and everybody picks up shovels and rakes and grumbles a lot ... and then they come back."



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Parents and businesses have contributed time, money and supplies to build a mini-farm classroom at Sharon Elementary School in Suwanee complete with an amphitheater, weather station, 50,000 pounds of boulders and stones for the study of native geology, native plants, a garden with compost facilities and a shed constructed of wood reclaimed from old barns.

Wing's expertise has given the site an air of sophistication. There is no wasted space, yet nothing is crowded together.

Brick pavers form curved paths between gardens and displays. An old hand pump, fed from an underground cistern that collects rainwater, stands at the entryway to the gardens.

Based on the work and supplies, Wing and the Bowlings estimate the project cost at between \$100,000-\$120,000.

The local science committee has already formulated a curriculum to teach students about pollination in the butterfly garden, geology in the rock garden and smelling sensations in the herb garden. There's even a class to study tree growth by counting the

rings of a giant red oak stump hauled in as a natural accent piece.

The food garden is geared toward the kids' favorite food: pizza. Volunteer Christine Murphy, who headed the science lab curriculum, focused on the gardens.

"We surveyed the teachers and children to find out what their likes and dislikes were," she said. Rows of peppers, hot peppers, onions, tomatoes and cilantro fill the vegetable plot, while the nearby herb garden contains all the ingredients to whip up a nice basil sauce.

Farther back, near the shed, is a colonial garden featuring early Georgian staples, like cotton, squash, cucumbers and beans.

There's also a mystery garden, filled with plants students will be challenged to identify.

"We have some Girl Scout troops that are going to help us take care of it during the summer," Murphy said. One of the recruits will be Murphy's fifth-grade daughter Caroline. "I come here over the weekends a lot and work on it already," she said. "I don't do it as a chore. I do it by choice and I have fun doing it."

Classmate Lucia Morris was the driving force behind the farm's flower garden. She and her friends petitioned the principal with a power point presentation last year before plans for the farm were even announced.

"I'm going to be going to middle school next year, so it's like I'm leaving something behind so other kids can enjoy it," she said. "It's also fun to walk through it and say, 'Oh, I planted that.'"