



A Field-to-Fork Experience: The Okanis Garden at Prairie Moon Waldorf School

By Laurie Ward

The Prairie Moon Waldorf School in Lawrence, Kansas recently received a grant to establish a market garden on the school grounds. The garden will provide a vital focus for the school's Waldorf curriculum, encouraging appreciation and connection to the natural world through active participation in planting, growing, and harvesting. Students will learn about plant biology, soil science, hydrology, gardening, mathematics, geology, geography, and business.

According to Kathy Farwell, the school's 1st/2nd grade teacher, "The children will create a relationship with the fertile earth that surrounds their school, and the harvest will provide nourishment for their community."

For the garden project, Prairie Moon partnered with Citizens for Responsible Planning (CRP), a group whose mission is to educate about the value of prime farmland in Douglas County and to promote the wisdom of creating local food systems in the Kansas River Valley. Situated in the Kansas River watershed on grounds rated Class 1 agricultural soils by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the school is in an ideal area for growing.

Sula Teller, food service manager of the natural food grocery Community Mercantile, has endorsed the Okanis Garden project and is committed to purchasing produce to be sold in the store's deli. Prairie Moon students will be offered a Merc kitchen tour, affording them a chance to see the direct connection of their food production, preparation, and consumer use. Certified master gardener and master composter Julie Fernandes-Ferreira has been hired as the garden manager. Barbara Clark, a local grower from CRP and rural neighbor of Prairie Moon, will act as volunteer garden mentor. Declares Ms. Clark: "This will be a true field-to-fork experience for the children."

Another supporter, the coordinator of the Downtown Lawrence Farmers' Market, Mercedes Taylor-Puckett, has asked to purchase Okanis Garden produce for the Market. The vegetables will be featured in a chef demonstration during one of the Saturday markets during the year. This opportunity will directly educate Prairie Moon students in the farm-to-market process. "It is the future generation of farmers and food consumers and our very best soils that will benefit from all the garden activity," says Ms. Clark.

Several events already have been scheduled around the endeavor: A community harvest dinner will feature produce from the garden. The Douglas County extension agent Jennifer Smith will give a soils presentation to the Prairie Moon students, faculty, and parents. Also, the Okanis Garden at Prairie Moon Waldorf School has applied to be part of the annual Kaw Valley Farm Tour, an increasingly popular event that draws city-dwellers and gourmards from all backgrounds.

Growers in the Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance, the oldest Midwest vegetable cooperative, have offered to assist the students and teachers with the garden and to advise with a Community Supported Agriculture subscription service.



Students, teachers, and a volunteer are ready for spring and turning the earth for the Okanis Garden at Prairie Moon Waldorf School, a new market garden on the school grounds which will serve Lawrence, Kansas, and the surrounding community. Photo by Rick Mitchell, March 2, 2009.

The teachers will make use of the garden by integrating academic, artistic, and practical work, recognizing nature's laws, seasons, and cycles. The hope is that the garden, with its scientific, cultural, educational, aesthetic, and economic components, will become an expanded classroom for all classes in the school. Everyone associated with the school – students, faculty, staff, parents, and other volunteers – will be involved in some way: planting, maintaining, and harvesting; helping with lessons; fashioning artistic enhancements and garden infrastructure; and overseeing managerial aspects of the Okanis Garden. The name Okanis is a version of the English spelling of Kansas – the early “people of the south wind,” who inhabited the Kansas River Valley.

“The addition of the garden will bring life to our school grounds,” according to early childhood teacher Bekah Zachritz. “And it will bring to even the smallest of children a sense of wonder and an opportunity to explore.”

The Waldorf Association of Lawrence was incorporated in 1996; Prairie Moon Waldorf School opened in fall 2005. “We look forward to having our students learn about growing their own food and also engaging in Lawrence’s effort to conserve prime soils and develop local food production,” states Board President Rick Mitchell.

The grant was received from the Elizabeth Schultz Environmental Fund through the Douglas County Community Foundation. Additional donations were also received and further funding is being developed to support this new, organic market garden for the Lawrence-area community.