

Published December 7th, 2011

Lafayette School District's Cost-Saving Demo Garden

By Sophie Braccini



Barbara Williams and Brad Crane in the garden
Photo Sophie Braccini

According to Barbara Williams and Brad Crane, it costs \$1.70 a square foot to maintain a lawn, so replacing decorative patches of grass with drought resistant native gardens that won't require any maintenance should make accounting sense. The idea appealed to Lafayette School District Superintendent Fred Brill and he gave the go-ahead for a test cost-saving garden in front of the District's administrative offices. A group of six parent volunteers got to work in early November- they claim that the money the District invested in plants for the 1000 square-foot garden will be recovered in savings within nine months.

"When I started the water usage audit at Lafayette Elementary, where my children go to school, I noticed that many native plants were over-watered on the premises," recounts Crane. "I talked to the principal about stopping the watering and she decided to refer my proposal to the District."

Crane's idea reached the Lafayette School District Green Team, a group composed of the superintendent, representatives from the District's school board, schools and staff, and a member of Sustainable Lafayette (Williams).

"We looked at the plan with Fred (Brill) and he decided to

try a test patch," says Williams, "there was an area of about 1000 square feet in front of the District's offices on School Street that served no recreational purpose and that we all thought would be a good test site."

Crane worked with Garth Jacober, who owns Mt. Diablo Nursery & Garden, for his list of plants. "We wanted plants that are going to provide a lot of colors," adds Williams, "we also ran the plan by Kim Curiel, the Garden Instructional Specialist at the Burton Valley Elementary Garden Classroom." A total of 76 plants were planted in the garden that will not require any water after the plants are established.

"The District's maintenance crew removed the lawn, we added amendments as we put our new plants in the ground, then we added mulch on top to contain the weeds," explains Crane. It took the parent volunteers four hours to complete the garden, including the flag stones that were donated to create a path. "The total cost of the plants was \$990," said Williams, "we estimated that the cost to maintain the area when it's planted with grass is approximately \$1300 a year (mow, weed, fertilize, edge, water). The cost to maintain the demo garden is about \$100/year for water, to get the plants started, and mulch. So the annual savings to the District is \$1200 per year or \$1.20 per square foot of lawn converted."

"There are other benefits to this garden," adds Crane, "native gardens are a great place for learning by experience. The native plants have been used by the indigenous American population in all sorts of ways that the children can learn. Native plants also attract native critters and pollinators and they do not require pesticides and fertilizers."

Since this is a demonstration garden, Williams and Crane hope that it will spread. "We have asked the District's maintenance crew to show us areas that present a maintenance challenge to see if we can do something about it."

Williams and Crane say that the feedback has been positive so far, both from the School District and the neighbors on School Street. But they know that it will take time to convert all of grassy areas that are not being used for recreational purposes. "Most principals still think that the front of their school needs a large, green, grassy area - it's what people are used to," says Crane.

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