

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

Tuesday, May 25, 2010

The 'Edible Acre' at ETHS

Ellen Galland

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Now emerging on only 1/8 of an acre (5,000 square feet), the Evanston Township High School's Edible Acre Pilot Project is an impressive new neighbor on the 1600 block of Dodge Avenue.

On an underused lot across from the ETHS main entrance, this quiet project has a lot of support.

The Edible Acre Pilot Project is a joint initiative by The Talking Farm and ETHS. The ETHS horticultural classes, Senior Studies program, the Green Team and community service office have all provided assistance over the past year, including creation of the current sign. High school graphic art students competed recently on a logo design. In addition, geometry students have been out on the site calculating sun angles. And the ETHS cafeterias will soon be offering produce from the gardens.

ETHS hopes to expand this pilot project onto the high school's immediate grounds to provide the full acre the name suggests.

To nurture the project through the summer, the City of Evanston's Summer Youth Employment Program is partnering with ETHS to provide eight workers during a two-month program. These students will work 25 hours per week, weeding, watering, harvesting and tending to the gardens in other useful ways.

In addition to providing produce for ETHS summer school students in the cafeterias, produce from the gardens will be sold at the West End Farmers' Market.

Neighbors are welcome and encouraged to be part of this project. There are eight beds set aside for them. Students will take care of watering the plots, possibly making them even more attractive for any neighbors interested in growing their own produce. There will be no locks on the decorative black wrought-iron fence that encloses the gardens. The idea is that the neighborhood and ETHS are benefitting and that there will be a good-faith effort to prevent any nighttime removals of delicious and nutritious vegetables.

The design of the current garden (see plan this page) packs a lot into 1/8 of an acre. A white gravel path will wind through the gardens. White brick beds that spiral upward will provide "accessible" gardening.



Vegetables are already sprouting at the Edible Acre.

The beds are spaced to provide accessibility, and to allow space for student art and sculpture to be placed among them.

There is a shade garden under the mature tree on Dodge where 650 hyacinth, tulip, daffodil, crocus and allium bulbs, donated by the Chicago Botanic Gardens, were planted last fall and bloomed this spring.

On the east end are leaf-compost containers, with leaves raked up at ETHS and two nearby churches.

On the south are “potato bins,” wire bins lined with newspapers that hold seed potatoes. Soil is added to the bin as the potato plants grow, with more soil being added as more potatoes form underneath. A butterfly garden, to help with pollination, will be planted in a sunny spot on the southwest corner of the plot.

Organic gardening practices are being followed, which include using garlic spray and neem oil, a natural insecticide (“insects would rather die than eat plants treated with neem oil” – per plant-care.com) extracted from the oil of the nut of the neem tree. The active insecticidal component of neem oil is the chemical azadirachtin. A nutrient-rich cover crop of oats was planted in October and dug into the soil to enrich it in the early spring (see excerpts from the Project Diary in sidebar).

Raspberry plants are growing along the north edge near the fence, fertilized with coffee grounds from ETHS. Outside that fence, roses will be planted, because raspberries and roses grow well together.

The Edible Acre is one of many local gardens that indicate enthusiasm for this method of teaching students about nutrition, fresh food and possible careers in growing organic, edible gardens. Locally, Dawes elementary school has been a pioneer in teaching and demonstrating edible gardening. In January 2010, Schools Actively Gardening in Evanston (SAGE) had its first organizational meeting at Dawes School. Providing strong continuing community support for edible gardens are Keep Evanston Beautiful, the Evanston Community Foundation, The Talking Farm, City of Evanston, local aldermen and the District 65 PTA Council.

Linda Kruhmin, farm operations manager of The Talking Farm (thetalkingfarm.org) and coordinator of the Edible Acre, is encouraged that Oakton Community College is looking at certification programs that would instruct students in greenhouse management and advanced horticultural studies. She added that Michigan State University has been teaching students about “hoop houses” (a type of passive solar greenhouse that allows for nonstop planting and harvesting) that can be used to grow produce in the upper Midwestern climate for almost ten months of the year.

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