

Helping to Save the Planet

Anne Beers Elementary School Future Home to Butterflies

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RINDY O'BRIEN



The old butterfly garden at Anne Beers Elementary School shed its old self Nov. 4 and, thanks to a grant from the Green.DC school program, began its transformation into a much larger garden and educational learning center. According to the butterfly garden designer, Cheryl Corson, the garden is breaking new ground for children's garden design.

The bright autumn day brought a variety of workers, designers, DC government environmental leaders and teachers to the back of the school where the new garden was being constructed. Anne Beers Elementary, located at 3600 Alabama Ave. SE, is a DC public school that serves children from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade and is part of the DC Catalyst Project as one of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Schools (also known as STEM).

In the 2009-2010 school year, six elementary schools have been chosen to integrate topics of science and math into the everyday classroom. Beers' science coordinator and teacher, Stephanie Harris, is recognized for her

enthusiasm and teaching skills of science and helps teachers at Beers utilize and explore with the children resources like the butterfly garden. "I am really looking forward to spring," says Harris, "to bring the children out to the garden and let them plant seeds in the butterfly wings. Too many of our kids don't have the opportunity to get out and do things like this. The garden is going to give them first-hand experiences."

DC Department of Environment Chooses Beers Elementary

Gilda Allen has known Harris for a long time and was thrilled to be able to include Beers School in its 2009 Green.DC schools' programs. As DC's environmental educator, Allen has helped over 30 schools set up their own conservation sites as part of the River Smart Schools initiative. The DC Department of the Environment works throughout the city with public and charter schools to conduct cleanups, tree plantings and hold school assemblies. At Beers,



1. Anne Beers School is one of six DC elementary schools that concentrate on science and math. 2. The butterfly garden will grow over the winter, and students will add more plants in the spring. 3. Gilda Allen, Cheryl Corson and Stephanie Harris have been part of the butterfly garden's design and installation. 4. The workers from the Gold Leaf Group helped to plant the flowers into the Filtrex tubes. 5. A sign at the corner of the butterfly garden announces the Beers School as part of the DC school conservation sites.

says Harris, "These programs are part of our everyday teaching, not an added program. The funds to build our butterfly garden and to provide the teachers with workshops are really a positive program for a school like ours."

Allen decided to hire the services of Cheryl Corson, whose background includes a master's degree in landscape architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Corson has a nationally certified playground safety inspector (CPSI) license. She also has years of experience designing schoolyard environments and playgrounds. Corson, in turn, reached out to Nancy Striniste, founder of Early Space. Striniste has been creating spaces for teaching children about the outdoors since 1984. Together, they worked with Harris to plan the garden.

Unique Design for Beers Butterfly Garden

Corson said the design for the garden came together within a few weeks, and what might have been a design obstacle, became a design innovation. "When we came to look at the site, we immediately noticed all the mature trees that shade the garden. We knew we couldn't dig into the ground and disturb the roots, so we had to come up with something else," Corson said. And, that is when the team came up with idea of building the butterfly shape above ground, using a fairly new product called Filtrexx.

Filtrexx is a green technology that combines locally made, annually renewable, biobased, recycled compost with a mesh containment system. Corson had seen it used to contain soil erosion but had never had a chance to work it into a garden design. The Gold Leaf Group, with more than 20 years of landscape and erosion experience, was happy to work with Corson and Striniste on the design.

Corson and Striniste drew out the butterfly design on the ground, while the Gold Leaf workers held the black mesh tubes as their truck blew the compost into the tubes.

Within minutes, the black tubes were like sandbags ready to be situated along the design drawings. Striniste started organizing the variety of plants that would be planted into the various wings and body of the butterfly to grow over the winter.

The landscape designers were very thoughtful about the spacing between

the structures leaving enough space for children to move around the plants. Each of the giant wings can be used as a classroom where children can sit outdoors among the plants and learn and observe the butterflies.

Plants to Attract the Butterflies and Butterflies to Pollinate the Plants

Of course, the real secret to a successful butterfly garden is the flowers and plants chosen. For gardeners and landscape designers, this is the fun part of the job, getting to think through the different kinds of plants that will help attract the butterflies. Butterflies taste food through their feet because that is where their taste sensors are located. So it is important to pick plants that will make them want to land on the flower. Other plants used are ones that caterpillars like to eat.

Over 275 trees, shrubs and perennial flowers were planted in the raised flower tubes of the butterfly. Students will be adding more plants in the spring. The plants used include the common persimmon tree, chokeberry shrub, Virginia sweetspire, hard hibiscus, New York ironweed, swamp milkweed, Joe Pye weed, purple coneflower, tickseeds and many Labrador violets. Holes were cut into the structure, and the plants roots separated before putting them into their designed space.

Bringing the butterflies back to Beers is just one small step in helping save the planet.

DC students and teachers are also busy finding other ways to maintain our ecological balance. Harris sees the butterfly garden as her way to educate the leaders of tomorrow about these natural relationships. All of us should hope they take their lessons to heart.

For more information about the organizations mentioned in this article, visit:

- **Cheryl Corson Designs** - www.cherylcorsondesigns.com
- **Nancy Striniste - Early Space** www.earlyspace.com
- **Paul Saiz - President of Gold Leaf Group** - www.goldleafgrp.com
- **Gilda Allen - DC Dept of Environment** - www.ddoe.dc.gov

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