



Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest

New Century Snapshot

Students learn a lesson that keeps on growing

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Lakewood and Laona, Wis. – What do you get when you mix eighty-one children with twenty species of plants and two offices? A whole lot of fun and learning that keeps on growing!

In October 2006, the Lakewood-Laona Ranger District initiated a two-year agreement to create a supply of locally-collected native plant materials for restoration projects while connecting local students with the land on which they live. The District partnered with the Nicolet Distance Education Network (NDEN) to involve third and fourth grade students from the Laona and Wabeno Elementary Schools in the installation of gardens at both District offices for the Forest's Native Plant Program.

The fun began with half-day field trips to collect native plant seeds on the Forest. The Wabeno students in Mr. Mike Chrisman's, Mrs. Laurie Christianson's, and Mr. Mark Asleson's classes collected seeds from sites in the Lakewood Seed Zone for the Lakewood office, and the Laona students in Mrs. Shelly Chitko's and Mrs. Laura Bobbe's classes collected in the Northern Highland Seed Zone for the Laona office. They worked with twenty species, including black-eyed susan, bottlebrush grass, Canada wild rye, common evening primrose, thimbleweed, wild bergamot, and wild columbine. They processed and planted the seeds and then tended the plants in classroom grow stations. In June, both Ranger Stations hosted Planting Day events that involved most of the District staff and provided students with a variety of educational activities and souvenirs.

Laona's Planting Day was June 1st. The Laona students installed their plants at the new garden by the American mountain ash (which employees had planted in 2005 for the FS Centennial). Students also got an up-close look at wildlife while examining everyone's dependence on native plants. Another activity introduced students to non-native invasive plant species and showed the effects of such invasions on native ecosystems.



Lakewood-Laona's Nicole Shutt assists students with planting.

Lakewood's Planting Day was June 4th, and the Wabeno students installed their plants at the office garden. In addition to the activity about wildlife and dependence on native plants, there were two more activities at Lakewood. Students participated in a hands-on demonstration of how the FS fights fires, learned about prescribed burns, and explored a recently-burned native plant area at the office. There was also an energetic game in which students got to "experience" the water cycle from the perspective of a water molecule.

When the students return to school in September, they will apply the lessons they've learned in this program to hone their techniques and join the new third graders in a second round of seed collection, processing, growing, and planting. Come June 2008, both offices will have approximately 500 square feet of native plant gardens, thanks to the students.

These gardens are expected to eventually save the FS many thousands of dollars per year in seed costs while educating visitors about the vast importance of native plants and encouraging people to grow and use native species in landscaping. The students involved in the program are gaining direct knowledge of, experience with, and appreciation for the native plants and ecosystems around their communities. This will prepare the students to make informed decisions regarding the future of those resources.

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