

Answering The Call Of The Wildflowers
By GEORGE WILKENS
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PLANT CITY - About once a month, after most employees have left for the day, two dozen children invade the Plant City public works building for a free lesson about nature, the environment and ecology.

The children, ages 4 through 12, participate in hands-on education programs aimed at helping develop environmentally conscious citizens dedicated to helping preserve their planet.

This month's hour-long program started with a slide show and short lesson on wildflowers, followed by what most interested the children: the opportunity to paint a terra cotta pot and anything else nearby.

"Parents, this should wash out of their clothing," environmental education coordinator Shawna Everidge told the adults as paint was distributed to their children. "If it doesn't, I've been lied to."

Trent Sanders, 9, used his four-color palette to create a classic "Jack in the Beanstalk" scene on the pot that would soon become a wildflower garden.

"I decided on that because it was a plant," he explained.

And plant, they would. As soon as the hand-painted pots were dry, soil was added and wildflower seeds distributed.

"Stick your finger in your dirt," then put the seeds in the resulting inch-deep hole, Everidge instructed.

"I just planted it. I made a garden," exclaimed 7-year-old Dalton Hull. "I put every single seed in there," he said, displaying his now-empty packet of seeds for Florida's state wildflower, coreopsis, commonly called "tickseed." The yellow-and-black flower that resembles a black-eyed Susan is featured on one of Florida's specialty license plates.

Dalton is a veteran of the local educational programs, said his mom, KelliHull, of Plant City. "We love it. We're at almost every one," she said.

Many are held at the city's public works building, 1802 Spooner Drive, and others, including some geared more for adults, at Bruton Memorial Library.

A recent workshop about bats provided participants with a house to attract the furry, flying mammals, plus information about the benefits of the nocturnal animals known for a voracious appetite for insects.

One of four programs funded for two years by the state Department of Transportation, that class emphasized how a bat-friendly backyard can be integrated into natural management of insects, reducing dependency upon pesticides, Everidge said.

On this night, it's all about flowers. After Everidge describes the many varieties and color variations, children view slides of some endangered species, including buffalo clover.

Scientific details are peppered with age-appropriate practical information. Regarding the plant coral bean, for example: "If you see it, don't eat it; it's poison," Everidge cautioned.

"I see them all the time," one boy said.

Amy Beatty came to the wildflower program with her five children. John, 12; Mercy, 10; Moriah, 7; and Merridith, 4, participated, while brother Tobias, almost 2, watched from the sideline with mom.

"They have a lot of fun, and the teacher is really great," said Beatty, an 11-year resident of Plant City who home-schools her children. "They love it. They couldn't wait to come back. This is the second program we've done," the other being what she jokingly refers to as "the homeless toad class."

On that night, children learned about toads, both beneficial and harmful, and created small clay structures designed to attract good toads to the family garden.

Beatty appreciates the environmental lessons learned in the sessions, such as information about carnivorous Cuban tree frogs devouring their indigenous Florida cousins.

"That's good for a child to know - when you introduce a nonnative species, it has impact," Beatty said.

That point was driven home by showing a photograph of "the victim," Florida's small green native tree frog, Beatty said.

Before the youngsters leave, their flower pots are securely wrapped for the trip home.

They're encouraged to take photographs once their flowers bloom, and e-mail copies to Everidge.

"We're encouraging a native plant," Everidge said.

"If we can get kids to have an appreciation of native Florida early in life, it will go a long way when they're making decisions later in life."

IF YOU GO

WHAT: City of Plant City environmental education program

COST: Free

REGISTRATION/INFORMATION: (813) 757-9289, ext. 2249

Upcoming Classes

WHEN: 6 p.m. July 17, "Under the Sea," a look at ocean life from A to Z, with children following in a coloring book provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Children will make clay bowls with seashell impressions.

WHERE: Plant City public works building, 1802 Spooner Drive

WHEN: 6:30 p.m. Aug. 28, "Worms Eat My Garbage," a lecture on vermicomposting and using a worm bin to transform table scraps into organic fertilizer. Attendees will make a worm bin to take home.

WHERE: Bruton Memorial Library, 302 W. McLendon St., Plant City

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