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## Botanical Center garden project sows promise

BY CYNTHIA REYNAUD • CREYNAUD@DMREG.COM • MAY 5, 2009

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The Des Moines Botanical Center is turning a new leaf with a gardening project designed to integrate surrounding neighborhoods and educate children.

The center's community gardening project is a collaboration with the Ellis I. Levitt Boys and Girls Club. With help from the children and community members, the botanical center cleaned up a formerly run down area of the property between the parking lot and Interstate Highway 235 and installed 20 garden beds.

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The gardens will be cared for by neighborhood families and groups from the Boys and Girls Club.

"It's just the most exciting thing that's happened here," said Elvin McDonald, director of Friends of the Des Moines Botanical Center.

Creating a community garden has always been a dream, McDonald said. With these gardens in particular, he saw benefits for everyone involved.

For the botanical center, it was the chance to clean up a neglected area of land and strengthen relationships with its neighbors. In turn, the children and families got a place to learn and bond and grow food.

"This is for everybody," McDonald said.

The Boys and Girls Club was eager to get on board. Staff developed a curriculum around the gardening project that teaches children lessons in science, math, nutrition and community service, said Jennifer Riggs, education program director of the club.

"With this we're giving them skills around growing and nurturing. ... And at the end there's a product," said Sam Carrell, executive director of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Iowa. "In tough economic times, it's great to have another source of food."

Most of the gardens will be filled with fruits and vegetables. On Wednesday, children and parents started the gardens off with asparagus, onions, potatoes and strawberries.

East-side resident Duhvall Veasley consulted with his 9-year-old daughter, Nadine, about what to grow in their garden. Her choice: exotically colored watermelons. His choice: peppers and tomatoes.

"This is going to be a new experience for us," Veasley said.

"I thought it was a good idea to bring my family together and then the community," said Julie Crutcher as she watched her sons, David, 10, and Jake, 9, stick potatoes into a plot.

"It not only cleans the area up, it's making our community look better," she said. "They're seeing that people care."



Elvin McDonald, director of Friends of the Des Moines Botanical Center and a gardening book author, gets right down and helps the kids with their planting. J-Nesha Henderson, 8, checks out a bulb before planting it in the garden.



Parker Gay, 8, shows what asparagus looks like in its pre-planted state.



Whitnee Cason, 10, works the dirt before planting.

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
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Cornisha Moore, 10, shows the results of all her hard work.

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