

State Grants Help Gardens Grow in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



(left to right) students Steven Wetterholm, Laura Hickey, Mina Lucacher and Kevin Gibbs attend to the salad garden with teacher Lois Mead
Photo Sophie Braccini

Paul Simonin was both happy and surprised to hear that the four schools of the Moraga School District were each awarded a \$2500 State grant for their gardens. As the Director of Administrative Services for the district, he had initiated and coordinated the four schools application process and knew that only a small percentage of the applicants would get the monies. In mid-October, the sum was wired with missions to the schools to promote school gardening programs linked to the healthy eating/healthy-living curriculum. “The four schools were awarded the maximum amount,” says Simonin, “this is really remarkable.”

Each school’s effort was led by a designated contact person. At Joaquin Moraga Intermediate (JM) it’s Elaine Guttman, at Rheem Elementary Alice Noyes, at Los Perales Elementary (LP) Andrea Barrett and at Camino Pablo Elementary (CP), Principal Neil Jennings.

“My name was on the paper but this is team work,” says Elaine Guttman, Core teacher at JM “all of us on the committee share the interest and duties.” JM is planning to use the grant money to expanding on already established projects.

“Last year a compost area was built by volunteers with our first MEF grant,” said Guttman, “an eagle scout has built redwood planters for the compost area, Moraga Garden Center is generously selling us plants and supplies at their cost, Moraga Garden Club gives us bulbs to plant each fall and this year gave us money, too.”

These projects have met with great community support and the next phase involves meeting with the PTA, JM Principal Bruce Burns and the Project Pride people to coordinate efforts with the parents. “We have big plans and we want to continue student centered gardening and art,” states Guttman.

LP and CP have existing gardens as well. CP boasts 6 ½ large beds in an en-

closed garden that was built six years ago and contains many edibles, native plants, birds and butterfly plants, a compost bin and work shed. According to

Jennings, the grant money will be used to buy new gardening tools for the students, a tool shed, teaching and training material to enhance existing programs.

The LP campus is undergoing some transformation with the building of a new library. However, some classes have a room garden where various botanical and art related activities are conducted. The grant will allow for the extension of the existing classroom beds and possibly become seed money for a garden adjacent to the new library.

Rheem was the only school that didn’t have a garden. A site was identified, on the hillside where an old volleyball court was unused. The Rheem garden committee which includes the school principal, parents and teachers, decided to raise money for the project. On top of the \$2500 garden grant obtained by the district, the school got a “Wastebusters” grant for \$2,631.00, and the PTA allocated \$6100 to the project.

The team has visited other school gardens to collect ideas: Burton Valley School in Lafayette, Camino Pablo School Garden and the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley. They collected many ideas concerning garden layout, use of volunteers, funding, tools, and curriculum.

Noyce, the fifth grade teacher who coordinates the program, says: “Our

Rheem teachers met and gave us feedback on curricular lessons which could be taught in the garden. For science we could teach lifecycles, food chains and webs, weather, climate, soil science, composting, photosynthesis, flower parts, insect life, butterfly life cycle – just to name a few possibilities. In language arts: poetry, story writing, imagining. In art: drawing, painting, tile and clay, observation of color. In social studies: Moraga History, native Indian plant uses, American colonial plant use, dyes plants. In Life skills: patience, responsibility, effort, caring, cooperation, etc. The list goes on and on.” The group is now focusing on preparing the site and involving the community in the design.

“We are very excited about how the garden will physically enhance our school and enrich our curriculum,” comments Noyce, “our staff embraces the idea that students learn best by doing. We know that the garden will lend itself to making learning authentic and unforgettable for our students.”

The Moraga School District recently won another grant from the State, to address obesity. The \$35,000/year award includes an annual cost of living adjustment. “We were lucky to get the grant for the three elementary schools,” explains Paul Simonin, “only thirty-six schools got it in the all county.” The grant funds must be applied to Physical Education. “We are lucky to have 1 ½ PE teacher that’s paid for by the PTAs,” says Simonin, “this recurring grant will allow us to hire fully credentialed PE teachers so each school will now have a ‘complete’ PE teacher.” One option would be to have these teachers work together 3 days a week, exercising an entire grade level at a time and freeing a full period for all the teachers in that grade. Teachers could implement common planning time, if they so desire.