

## School gardening club plants new roots for the next 150 years



**By Brock Weir**

Students, parents, teachers and members from the community at large gathered together at Rick Hansen Public School on Thursday night to plant the seeds for the future.

The school, which is located on Mavrinac Boulevard, recently received a \$1,500 grant from the Ministry of Education, as part of the Canada 150 celebrations, to "green" their garden.

A hugely popular feature at the school, the garden is a focal point for so many students who not only learn the ins and outs of how plants and veggies grow, but it is increasingly becoming a focal point for the community as a whole. With their grant money, and indeed Thursday's event, they hope to reinforce and expand these ties for years to come.

With the money in hand, and working with the Town of Aurora, they have planted new autumn blaze maple trees which will provide shade and learning opportunities for many generations of Aurora students.

As for the current crop of students, however, any way they can expand their garden is a cause for celebration.

"The Garden Club, as part of the Eco Team, are thrilled with all the gardening that has been happening and they have actually done everything," says teacher Aimee Rail. "They have planted seeds in classrooms all over the school, and we had been growing them indoors for about eight weeks. While all of this is happening we thought it would be great if we could have trees in the garden for some shade and also to make it a comfortable space for reading and relaxing and enjoying the outdoor gardening experience."

According to fellow teacher Michael Yoshida, the garden has been a work in progress for the last five years, intended to be a community project to have a green living space. It is, he said, part of Rick Hansen's plans for Eco Certification.

"The original genesis of the garden was to create that green space for the community," he says.

Throughout the process, Principal Lisa Jeremic says the Rick Hansen School Council has been very supportive of everything the Eco Team and Garden Club have been trying to achieve. Their endeavours, she says, has led to a great "and growing" partnership between staff, students, parents, families, and local organizations.

Thursday's planting party was a way to not only strengthen these bonds, but celebrate Canada's history, she adds.

In the lead up to the event itself, the excitement among Club members reached fever pitch. Indeed, that is the case with most of the activities that take place within the clubs themselves, whether the kids are eager to learn about the benefits of healthy eating, environmental stewardship, or simply harvesting the fruits (and vegetables) of their labour.

"[The Garden fosters] a collective responsibility in coming together as a community to take care of our environment and the idea that everyone is connected," says Ms. Jeremic. "And they have a sense of empowerment that they know what to do and how their contributions make a difference. It is also giving our students a voice in what they want to see for our community" and that is what we want to see.

"It is about creating a sense of belonging for children and adults, for creating that community. We have a very diverse community and we continue to grow, so this is an opportunity for families to get together knowing that when children and adults are involved and caring for things, the more successful it will be."

To that end, Thursday's party was also an opportunity for parents to learn how they can become more involved, signing up to help nearby students maintain and cultivate ? and water and weed ? the school garden in the sultry summer months. ?We want to continue to grow the garden and make sure that it is maintained well beyond a couple of teachers running it so it really does become a community initiative and the garden can be sustained and expanded,? says Mr. Yoshida.

Rick Hansen P.S.'s Family Garden and Tree Planting Day was held in conjunction with School Garden Celebration Week, a project of Imagine a Garden in Every School. It was hosted in partnership with the Town of Aurora, the Ministry of Education, the Rick Hansen Public School Parent Council, the Healthy Kids Community Challenge, Windfall Ecology Centre and the York Region Food Network.