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"Ding" Darling Wildlife Society - Friends of the Refuge

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Caption for diggers: East Lee County High students go to work on their Pocket Refuge pollinator garden.

Caption for 2kids: Students at Tice Elementary planted and mulched 100 plants one day in mid-April.

\$12K grant monies from “Ding” Darling create Pocket Refuges at local schools in need

Each year since 2005, the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge, in partnership with the “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society-Friends of the Refuge (DDWS), has awarded conservation grants to local teachers for science projects related to studying the environment.

This year’s Environmental Education Grant program has created “Pocket Refuges” at eight Lee County district schools to teach students about the importance of pollinators and the habitat that sustains them. Working with district Environmental Education Resource Susan Hassett, DDWS has distributed a total of more than \$12,000 (\$1,500-plus to each of the schools) to buy supplies to create native pollinator gardens from a menu of indigenous plants, bird houses, trail cameras, solar-powered fountains, and other enhancements. Schools submitted proposals for building their gardens, which must be completed by May, and maintaining them for two years.

“Besides teaching kids the importance of pollinators, the ‘Pocket Refuges’ are being used as mini field trips outside the classroom, where teachers can address different class subjects in an experiential way,” said Supervisory Refuge Ranger Toni Westland, who helped coordinate the project. “We’re finding the students feel a deep pride and ownership in their school’s garden.”

Schools participating in this year's Pocket Refuge programs include Fort Myers schools Colonial Elementary, Edison Park Creative and Express Arts School, Lee Adolescent Mothers Program, South Fort Myers High, and Tice Elementary; Hancock Creek Elementary in North Fort Myers; East Lee County High in Lehigh Acres; and Trafalgar Middle in Cape Coral.

"This project is instrumental to provide an opportunity for the applied learning of science concepts in an easily accessible outdoor laboratory," said Hassett. "The Pocket Refuges have become a source of joy and pride for school communities, who have collaborated and invested time and resources to build a beautiful spot for wildlife and people to find serenity and inspiration. Transportation to off-campus locations for field trips has become practically impossible, so many teachers are very glad for an on-campus experience that can happen daily, allowing students to study the changes over time and the patterns of the natural world that are beneficial to us all."

Most of the schools have already begun work on their gardens. Before Easter, staff and volunteers from "Ding" Darling spent a day at its current target Title 1 school, Tice Elementary, to work with students and teachers to get its pollinator garden underway with more than 100 plants put in the ground.

"What a fun day digging in the dirt with students, staff, and volunteers," said Wendy Kindig, chair of the "Ding" Darling Education Committee, which oversees grant programs. "One highlight was finding a monarch caterpillar on a black-eyed Susan that formed a chrysalis before our very eyes! Such a teachable moment."

"We are all very grateful for the leadership and generosity of the 'Ding' Darling Wildlife Society to support these dreams and to invest in a new learning experience for our students," said Hassett. "The students who came out to help plant with their teachers, families, and community have new connections that will reap benefits for a lifetime. Thank you for creating a more beautiful Lee County, both visually and experientially."

DDWS funds Pocket Refuge projects through private philanthropy. Anyone interested in being a part of this and other experiential learning opportunities can contact Sierra Hoisington at shois@dingdarlingsociety.org or 239-472-1100 ext. 4.

ABOUT DDWS



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As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, DDWS works to support J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge's mission of conservation, wildlife and habitat protection, research, and public education through charitable donations and Refuge Nature Shop profits.

To support DDWS and the refuge with a tax-deductible gift, visit dingdarlingsociety.org or contact Birgie Miller at 239-472-1100 ext. 4 or director@dingdarlingsociety.org.

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