

PRINCETON: HS makes gardening a phys. ed. choice

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Next spring, gym class for some Princeton High School students will mean getting down and dirty.

The school will add gardening as a physical education elective. But first, some volunteers will be getting their hands dirty this weekend.

Teachers, administrators, parents and students will gather Sunday morning to install 16 new garden beds on the high school grounds that will be used for the class, part of an interdisciplinary curriculum initiative at the high school centered around horticulture and its inherent health benefits.

The school is hoping to turn the "garden raising" into a community event, which will be held from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. rain or shine. Volunteers who are willing to get their hands dirty are also encouraged to show up and lend a hand, according to event organizers.

Participants will be rewarded for their efforts with free food from local eateries, including chili and bread donated by Terra Momo, apple cider donated by the Whole Earth Center and coffee from Small World.

The initiative was the brainchild of Matt Wilkinson, a physical education teacher at Princeton High School. He said he realized that the movement toward sustainability and healthier lifestyles places a lot of emphasis on the consumption of food, sometimes leaving behind the act of gardening itself, which is also a healthy component of the process.

"I thought, let's marry these two concepts together," he said. "I came up with the idea of creating an option through the physical education program at Princeton Regional Schools to allow students to go through a fitness program using gardening."

Mr. Wilkinson, who is also a horticulturist, said he hopes the students who take the class will both build muscle moving dirt and get hooked on the love of gardening.

The class will include turning compost piles, weeding, and getting fit, participating in a weightlifting program designed to support a gardening lifestyle. But students will also be examining the science behind gardening.

"It's more than just pulling weeds and putting a shovel in dirt," Mr. Wilkinson said. "It's analyzing the whole process of gardening."

All elementary schools in the Princeton Regional School District already have gardens, and this new class will build on that initial exposure, he said.

But it's going to be more than the students in the class who will benefit from the gardens.

For example, he said, English classes could request that a plant mentioned in literature be grown, or a health class could use the vegetables grown to teach about nutrition.

The school's yoga gym class will use a platform in the garden, which will be surrounded with aromatic plants, instead of an artificial indoor environment, he said.

"The phys. ed. students will maintain the garden, but the school academic community will use the garden," he said.

He also envisions the gardens becoming a resource for the entire community. Senior citizens could be invited to the garden for salad lunches, or the students could plant at the request of a group within the community.

"If a group has a specific heritage that is based around plants," he said, "we'll work it and we'll educate people on why it's important to that group."

"It's a far-reaching project that I think is going to benefit an enormous amount of people."
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