

Published: June 09, 2008 08:06 am, The Daily Star

OCCA gives mini-grants to area schools

The Otsego County Conservation Association has awarded mini-grants to two local schools to enable them to carry out projects of an environmental nature.

Gilbertsville-Mount Upton Central School received \$455 for the purchase of five handheld global positioning systems to study natural areas surrounding the school. Cooperstown Central School received \$500 toward the design and creation of an organic "Kid Garden" to introduce sustainable agriculture to its students.

According to G-MU Earth science teacher Mark Muller, students will learn about the local topography through use of the GPS units and will learn how, at certain elevations, environmental conditions affect plant and animal life. They will also get an idea of how changes in topography might have negative effects on plant and animal life, Muller said.

"I want them to see how everything is connected," Muller said.

The Cooperstown project will begin in fall 2008 with construction of water lines, a small barn and fencing. Site development will follow during the school year by removing sod, improving soil and construction of cold frames. Eight four-by-25-foot raised-bed gardens will be assembled on the site. The project will also feature low-tech methods of growing vegetables, such as a cold-frame and an unheated greenhouse.

"Although Cooperstown is a rural, historically agricultural community, only a small percentage of our food is now locally grown," wrote elementary school Principal Teresa Gorman in the request to OCCA.

"In light of rising costs of energy (and thus transportation), this arrangement is not sustainable. We plan to create a school-based organic garden to educate ourselves and our children about growing food and conserving our precious resources," she wrote.

Beyond producing food and teaching gardening skills, benefits of the project include serving as a model for a healthy lifestyle and healthy eating habits, providing an experimental, hands-on opportunity to teach related topics such as language arts, chemistry, math, biology, Earth science and research and engaging students in a meaningful public service, Gorman said.

"This is truly an interdisciplinary project that encourages commitment and follow-up from students," Gorman said.

In the past, OCCA has funded projects at various area schools for storm drain marking, guides for tree identification, design and construction of a raised-bed garden in a school courtyard and binoculars for bird identification.

"There is no formal application form for a grant request," said Erik Miller, OCCA executive director. "However, applicants should request our grant guidelines before submitting a request."

Guidelines and information are available at 547-4488 or occa@wpe.com.

The Otsego County Conservation Association is a nonprofit environmental organization serving the county since 1968.

OCCA promotes the enjoyment and sustainable use of Otsego County's natural resources through education, advocacy, resource management, research and planning.

All of OCCA's publications are available by contacting OCCA at 547-4488 or director@occainfo.org.