

## Cambridge Isanti School

### Garden

Isanti County Master Gardener,  
Katie Walker

It all started with a  
dream.....build a school garden  
that serves the needs of a high



school classroom as well as the multilayered needs of the surrounding community. As a Family and Consumer Science Teacher at Cambridge-Isanti High School I always thought about having a garden accessible for my food and nutrition classes, a place for students to develop the land, grow food, and learn to cook, all with produce they grew themselves. When that idea became a reality two years ago it was a synthesis of much talent and hard work. After much turmoil, tears, and tenacity, the garden grew! Many people, organizations, and students contributed to this project.

The idea of a school garden moved into a project when I met Melissa Carstensen, an employee for Isanti County Public Health working as State Health Improvement Program Coordinator. She was also interested in the garden idea. After several conversations, Melissa and I decided to take our chances in starting a garden. I applied for funding through the Allina Health System, Neighborhood Health Connections Grant. With great surprise and anticipation we received the grant! Reflecting back, one of the best things we did was surround ourselves with supportive, energetic, and knowledgeable people who had a passion for gardening, fresh food, and giving back to our local community. One of the most importance partnerships we formed was with the Isanti County Master Gardener Program. The Isanti County Master Gardner's were,

and continue to be, key in assisting us along each step of the way in developing the garden idea. Besides the Master Gardeners, many other groups played important roles in developing the school garden. Groups we collaborated with include Cambridge Isanti District staff and students, Adventure Center Program students and teachers, the local Lions Club, Isanti County Public Health, Isanti County Parks, Family Pathways and Isanti County Food Shelves, Four Seasons Garden Group, and the Senior Activity Center-Friendship Café, as well as community members, local businesses and our own family members.

With our support around us, we began. The first task was to locate a garden site. A garden location is essential for good growth and we had a few transitions before deciding on the perfect location. Access for all students and a location close to school were important in planning the garden site. Working closely with the school district building and grounds people was essential to reaching our goal. We did find a remarkable site! It is a large open area south of the high school. It contains a close-by parking area as well as a concrete entrance and a 20'x80' concrete area, making the garden handicap accessible. The tillable space for gardening is 50'x80'.

Designing a secure fence was important to keep wildlife out and produce and supplies safe. Our garden fence was designed by Master Gardener, John Nordin and built by an energetic group of



students, community members, and high school staff. The 3 ½ foot post holes were drilled by

Isanti County Park's tractor augur and then hand dug 1 foot to set posts below the frost line. It took about three days to complete the fence.

With the soil tested and balanced and the fence constructed, we were finally ready to till and plant the garden. As a part of our handicapped accessibility goal, we put in wooden raised beds. These were placed on the large concrete slab within our garden gate and are planted and maintained by the summer special education program. They



grow flowers, vegetables, and herbs. Students in family and consumer science (FACS) food's classes planted their portion of the garden as part of a unit on the food supply and locally grown foods.

One obstacle to a school garden is “who runs the garden all summer?” We knew that high school students would not want to volunteer during the summer to manage the garden. Our plan was to have volunteers to maintain and water the garden. Besides using volunteers, we developed a sharecropping program. Sharecropping is a system where groups can volunteer to take a plot in our school garden. We looked to sharecrop with organizations that were affiliated with a community outreach program and would be willing to work with students. The sharecroppers agreed to donate 50% of their produce to the high school and keep the other half for their organization. Our sharecroppers have been Isanti County Master Gardeners, Isanti County Public Health, Lion's Club and SACS. We are always looking for individuals and families to help out.



Many other key people assist in making our garden a success. The CIHS construction trades class built our garden shed. This shed sits inside our fence and holds all of the garden supplies. The CIHS art

program held a contest and student artwork was selected for our school garden sign in front of the garden. The family and consumer science classes helped to plant and harvest produce and



used this produce in their cooking classes. Finally, my father, Don Soler, built sharecropper plot sign holders that helped identify the crops and sharecroppers information. He also refurbished the bench in our

Angel Garden, a memorial garden that sits outside the fenced garden area.

The educational component of the school garden is limitless. In addition to the FACS program curriculum and special education participation, this summer we held garden lessons for the Cambridge Isanti Adventure Center students based on gardening, teamwork and cooking.

The successes of our harvests are spectacular!  
In addition to using produce in the classroom, we donate over 500 pounds of food annually to local families in our community. We have felt so blessed with this project! For more information or if you are interested in being a part of the school garden, please contact Katie Walker (763-689-3401) or Melissa Carstensen (763-689-8265).



