

BRIDGE students constructing a 'rain garden'

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BRIDGE Alternative High School students, from left, Lacen Drew Heikkila and Chris Rapping work on the layout for the school's rain water garden, which is intended to catch rain water runoff from a parking lot, then filter it of pollutants before sending into the groundwater.

HANCOCK - Although a garden is a place for pretty flowers, sometimes it can do more, such as filter pollutants from rain water runoff before it gets into the ecosystem.



That's the purpose of a "rain garden," under construction by students at the BRIDGE Alternative High School.

The rain garden project in a corner of the Copper Country Intermediate School District-owned parking lot across from the school on Quincy Street in Hancock, is being overseen by Chuck Palosaari, BRIDGE science and American history teacher, who said some of its funding comes from a grant from the Lake Superior Stewardship Initiative.

Palosaari said the city of Hancock provided some help, also, with topsoil, leaf mulch, and labor and equipment to tear up the section of asphalt where the garden will be.

Palosaari said the garden is built in a depression so it can catch rain water runoff.

"When it rains, it will catch any water that wouldn't get through the blacktop," he said.

Most rain water enters storm drains and then runs to the Portage Lake Shipping Canal, Palosaari said. The water entering the rain garden will be filtered of some pollutants, such as oil, gasoline and road salt. It will then enter the groundwater, and eventually work its way to the canal.

The garden will contain many plant species, including but not limited to, bee balm, wild rye, Black-eyed Susans and blue iris.

"They're native plants, so they're well adapted to our environment," he said. "They're going to thrive in this garden."

The soil the garden is built on is sandy, and Palosaari said it should drain well.

"The drainage underneath is excellent," he said.

The layout of the garden was designed by 11th grade BRIDGE student Shannon Ennis, who said she'd never done such a thing before, but she had an idea of what she wanted.

"I wanted it to be kind of symmetrical," she said.

Palosaari said three sites in Hancock were initially chosen for rain gardens, but the site across from the BRIDGE building, which will drain only a small part of the parking lot, was determined to be the best site.

The other candidates were another parking lot behind the 5th & Elm Coffee Shop one block north of the school, but Palosaari said there were concerns snow removal might negatively affect the placing of a garden there. The other considered site was Terrace Park, which is another block beyond that, but it has a dirt surface, so runoff wouldn't be as much of a concern.

Another reason the school parking lot was chosen, Palosaari said, was because it's visible to the public, and one component of the project is to provide information about the effects of human activity on the Great Lakes.

"That's part of the mission, to educate the public," he said.

To that end, a sign will be placed at the garden to explain its purpose.

Palosaari said if more funding is found, the garden might be enlarged, and a well may be placed to check to what degree pollutants are filtered.

"That's something we could easily do in our science room," he said.

Palosaari said the LSSI grant will be used also to stencil messages at storm drains telling people not to dump pollutants in them because they drain to the canal. So far, about 90 of the 180 drains have been stenciled.

Fly fishing equipment will also be purchased, with the intent of giving the students a direct connection to the Lake Superior watershed, Palosaari said. Fishing trips will be taken to Twin Lakes and somewhere in Keweenaw County.

The grant money will also be used to create posters explaining about the rain garden and the drain stenciling, and to take the students on a trip around the canal on the Michigan Technological University Research Vessel Agassiz.

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