

HAART Students to participate in pollinator workshop

On September 28th, about 150 Highlands Advanced Academics Rising Together (HART) students from Kindergarten to fifth grade, will climb aboard a bus and head to the Bert J. Harris Agriculture Center. The workshop they will attend there will consist of eight different stations that will teach them about the pollination and gardening process. Each elementary school in Highlands County will be installing a pollinator garden on their school grounds this year and this workshop is designed to prepare them to take care of it using environmental practices.

Patricia Carter from Lake Placid, Lake Country and Fred Wilde, Laura Carter from Avon and Park, Heidi Stivender from Cracker Trail, Mollie Stephens from Sun 'n Lake and Gail Melendy from Memorial and Woodlawn elementary schools are all teachers of the HAART program. They came up with the idea for the pollinator gardens because they are studying Florida habitats this year. The idea is to create an actual mini-habitat in each school so that the kids can learn about and observe the wildlife that is attracted to these areas.

The curriculum the children are learning is all about "Backyard Habitats." They will study five main ecosystems found in Florida. The sandhill/scrub, coastal strand, dry prairie, hardwood hammock and wetlands will be the subject matter. They will learn environmentally friendly practices with hands-on creation and design of these gardens. The goal is to establish environmental stewardship and playing out roles as responsible citizens toward our natural resources.

A partnership has formed between the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District, Highlands County Extension Office/IFAS, Highlands County Parks and Natural Resources Department and the HART program teachers along with many volunteers that will teach these young minds about the pollination process. Each school will be supplied with a composter and rain barrel for their garden.

Stations will include composting, vermicomposting, planting a seed, rain barrels, water cycle, butterflies, bees, Florida Friendly plants and watersheds and how to protect them. This interactive experience should not only be educational for the students, but lots of fun.

A recent survey showed that most Americans don't really understand the pollination process and how important our pollinators are. Many folks relate pollen with allergies and dangerous animals such as bees. But for every bite out of three, the food consumed came from the efforts of a bee, butterfly, bat, bird or some other type of pollinator. In fact, animals provide pollination services for over three-quarters of the staple crop plants that feed human kind and for 90% of all flowering plants in the world. (Global Pesticide Campaigner)

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), we are facing an "impending pollination crisis," in which both wild and managed pollinators are disappearing at alarming rates owing to habitat loss, pesticide poisoning, diseases and pests.

Studies reveal that over 100,000 different animal species help in the pollination of over 250,000 types of wild flowering plants. Bees, wasps, moths, butterflies, flies, beetles, hummingbirds, bats, birds, various mammals and even some types of lizards are all essential in the pollination process. It is important to pass this important information on to today's youth who must learn to appreciate the benefits that a diversity of pollinators provides.

Thanks to the many volunteers and staff who are working hard to make sure the workshop will be the best that it can be. Earth Team members, Master Gardeners, and pollinator specialists are making the kits for the composters and rain barrels, manning booths and sharing ideas with staff. These events simply wouldn't be possible without their help. The Supervisors from the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District have generously donated funds to purchase all the materials for the composters in an effort to supply each school with one. The Highlands County Extension Service/Master Gardeners are supplying drums and all necessary supplies for the rain barrels.

It is encouraging to know that so many are working toward the common goal of making sure our future generation is well equipped to protect their environment.