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Pinnacle School students plant native species to create prairie by school

By Andy Graham
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Happy Lacy-Connell's mood matched his name Thursday afternoon as he multi-tasked on the Pinnacle School grounds.

The sixth-grader was plunging a bulb-planter into mulch-enriched soil as he listened, via a set of earbuds, to the audio book version of Nancy Farmer's science fiction novel "House of the Scorpion."

He seemed a happy warrior. A warrior against "alien invasion."

Students at Pinnacle, an independent nonprofit school for students in grades K-12 with dyslexia and similar learning differences, have spent a good deal of time this school year combating alien invasive plant species that threaten to squeeze out the region's native vegetation and adversely affect ecosystems.

Thursday, under the direction of science teacher Meredith Sullivan, 22 of them were creating a "Pinnacle prairie" on the north side of the school grounds off Arlington Road by planting native species. "We're planting purple coneflower, heath asters, little bluestem — 20 different species, overall, and 32 of each," Sullivan said, "so that's 640 plants in our 3,000-square-foot plot.

"We've studied invasive species all year long. We've been to Lake Lemon six times to help remove invasive species found in a Sycamore Land Trust plot there, and also here around our own school grounds. Now, the focus is on the positive alternatives, the native species that can be nurtured in place of the invaders."

It's all part of "Kids for Native Plant Awareness and Propagation," Pinnacle's environmental science program for which Sullivan wrote and won a \$9,100 National Science Teachers Association Toyota Tapestry grant last year.

Sullivan, selected to address the NSTA's national convention on the topic of "alien invasion," arranged a program that has included a "meet the scientists" panel of local experts who have visited Pinnacle: Parks experts Steve Cotter, Nancy Meyer and Sandy Belth, Ecologic's Spencer Goehl, Nature's Crossroads' Laura Brown-Cano and Maggie Sullivan and Sycamore Land Trust education specialists Carroll Ritter and Betsee LaPointe.

Ritter and LaPointe helped guide the junkets to Lake Lemon that included more than 50 Pinnacle students. Last fall, students identified native trees and invasive species, mapping affected areas with handheld GPS devices.

Invasive species, fifth-grader Emma O'Mahoney noted, upset nature's balance.

"Invasive species such as kudzu and Japanese honeysuckle — we're talking 'Little Shop of Horrors' in terms of out-of-control plants," she said. "We've all seen the pictures of those plants just taking over entire areas, covering cars, just over-growing everything.

"The first invasive plant I cut down out at Lake Lemon was a 3-inch grapevine that was killing a tree. It can climb up a tree and suffocate it up top. So we've been going from learning about invasives to doing something about them."

Happy said student methods of dealing with invasives included pulling plants up by the roots, cutting plants, and combining cutting with herbicide. Classmate Markus Peterson warned that "in some cases, if you leave even just a little piece of root, that plant is going to rally and spread." Markus added: "We could end up losing virtually all our native plant species unless we take action."

Sullivan reminds her students that consequences don't involve only the native plant species themselves. "It's all of the animals and other elements of the ecosystem dependent upon those native plants, too," she said. "And fighting invasives can be time-consuming and expensive. Steve Cotter can tell you about major restoration work required at Lake Griffy to battle Brazilian Elodea, an invasive aquarium plant people apparently just dropped in the lake."



Emma O'Mahoney dances under a stack of emptied plant pots held by Lindsey Powers, left, and Jessica Laffin Thursday at the Pinnacle School's new prairie garden. David Snodgress | Herald-Times



Meredith Sullivan, a teacher at Pinnacle School, helps Annie Stephenson sink a plant into the soil Thursday at the school's new prairie garden. David Snodgress | Herald-Times



Pinnacle students, from left, David Lawrence, Grayson McKim and Reid Jordan, spread peat moss Thursday on the school's new prairie garden. David Snodgress | Herald-Times

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