

# Making A Difference With A Rain Garden



After observing a waterfall pouring off the roof of St. Peter's Lutheran School in Big Rapids during a rain-storm, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Karen Bailey, began dreaming of constructing a rain

garden in the church courtyard to prevent water from flowing directly into the Muskegon River through a storm drain.

For many years, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes have adopted a local stream and monitored its water quality. Constructing a rain garden would be another opportunity for the students to have a positive impact on the Muskegon River. A rain garden consists of deep rooted native Michigan plants that are able to absorb and filter rainwater that would otherwise dump contaminated, warmed water into the river. This storm water can also cause erosion and flooding. In addition, the garden could be used as an outdoor classroom that would require very little maintenance because the native plants do not need to be watered or fertilized.

Mrs. Bailey's students eagerly began research to determine if the courtyard could support a rain garden. Construction plans were studied and drawn up. Next, a student committee met with St. Peter's trustees seeking permission to turn the courtyard lawn into a rain garden.

Terry Stilson, program coordinator for the Muskegon River Watershed Assembly, was the knowledgeable "we can do this" partner that led the students through the project. She wrote and received grants from the Consumers Energy Foun-

dation and the Wildflower Association of Michigan. The Wege Foundation provided a matching grant, and a St. Peter's layperson gave a generous donation which allowed a brick path to be constructed within the rain garden.

The students' plans were approved and construction began in fall 2009. New Horizon Landscaping removed the sod and created a bowl shape in the 1,900 square foot courtyard. The crew also constructed a brick pathway within the garden to allow for easy access.

The students hauled composted soil to the garden by the wheelbarrow load and spread it generously across the courtyard with the assistance of several dads and one dad's tractor. Then they planted 1,100 native Michigan plants and spread about 90 bags of mulch, completing the garden.

The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students worked with incredible dedication, teamwork, and tenacity. They were bursting with pride at their accomplishments. They had helped to construct a beautiful outdoor classroom for the school and community and had positively impacted "their" Muskegon River.

This project has been one of the biggest highlights of Mrs. Bailey's career. Her students have demonstrated good stewardship of God's creation and gained a new level of understanding of how they can make a difference in the environment – in their community and beyond.

