

*Community Corner*

NJASA Treasurer J. Kenyon Kummings  
Chief Education Officer, Wildwood Public Schools



## ***Cultivating Learning: How Wildwood’s Urban Garden Became a Living Classroom***

Open space is a limited commodity in urban settings. Wildwood Public Schools recognized an opportunity when an area adjacent to the high school became available. Several ideas were proposed, but the idea that had the most impact for our student body and community was to create an urban community garden.



The initiative began with the construction of raised garden beds, made possible through the district’s Title IV federal funds under the Nita S. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers after school and summer programs, known locally as “Wave 21”. Under the guidance of dedicated faculty, students constructed the planter boxes and began cultivating herbs, tomatoes, cucumbers, and a variety of leafy greens. What started as an after-school activity soon blossomed into a meaningful hands-on educational experience that expanded into a larger area adjacent to the raised beds. Larger and more raised beds were constructed within a fenced area, and a wider variety of vegetables and

herbs were planted and harvested. The harvest was then used to prepare fresh salads within the 21st Century program. As yields grew, the produce found its way into the high school’s Culinary Arts program and the Wave 21 Warrior Fresh Farm-to-Table project was born. This farm-to-table concept created a collaboration that deepened students’ understanding of food systems and sustainability.

The success of the garden sparked ambition for growth. A few years later, the Wave 21 coordinator proposed expanding the initiative through the construction of a greenhouse. This was achieved through collaborative funding from the 21st Century program, Sustainable Jersey for Schools and OceanFirst Bank grants. Community partnerships also played a large part in the construction and start-up of the greenhouse including from current Wildwood



Mayor Ernest Troiano's masonry company, and Wildwood High Alumnus Leonard Catanoso's consultation and contributions through his business, the Garden Greenhouse and Nursery. Through these collaborations, the district constructed a fully equipped greenhouse built to industry standards and complete with heating, ventilation, and a hydroponic system. The addition of the greenhouse significantly extended the growing season and diversified what could be cultivated.

This expansion in 2018 marked a turning point. Through consultation with the owner of Cape May Microgreens, a company that supplies microgreens to local restaurants, WAVE 21 students began growing microgreens during the after school and summer programs and then sold them in summer farmer's markets in Wildwood. These experiences allowed students to connect classroom learning with real-world application, reinforcing concepts of entrepreneurship, sustainability, and community engagement.

What began as an after-school enrichment activity then evolved into a cornerstone of the Wildwood High School academic program. The greenhouse enabled the introduction of formal horticulture courses within the high school's program of studies. After one year of horticulture classes in 2024-2025, a Horticulture 2 class has been added to the program of studies for 2025-2026. The garden/greenhouse currently offers learning opportunities to students in grades 3 - 12 through its use in the Wave 21 after school and summer programs.

The area surrounding the greenhouse continued to develop through the addition of an outdoor classroom through joint grant funding from OceanFirst Bank expanding opportunities for interdisciplinary learning. An industrial composter, added during the 2023-2024 school year, further strengthened the program's sustainability focus, teaching students about waste reduction, soil regeneration, and environmental responsibility.

Today, the urban garden is fully integrated into the school-day curriculum. Students participate in authentic, hands-on learning experiences that align with the New Jersey Student Learning Standards while fostering critical 21st-century skills. Through planting, cultivating, and harvesting, they explore plant biology, ecosystems, sustainability, and



environmental science in tangible ways. The collaborative nature of greenhouse work builds communication, teamwork, and project management skills, while problem-solving opportunities arise as students monitor environmental conditions and respond to challenges such as pests, plant disease, and seasonal changes.

Many students who were first introduced to gardening through the 21st Century After School Program have continued their journey by enrolling in these courses. The urban garden has had a particularly positive impact on special education students, empowering them through responsibility, ownership, and visible achievement. Reflecting this dedication to environmental education, Wildwood High School was awarded the Eco-Schools USA Green Flag in 2024, the program's highest honor.

What began as a small collection of raised beds has grown into a living classroom and a model of innovative urban education. By integrating academic content with real-world application and community engagement, the garden serves as a model for innovative education. The Wildwood Urban Garden exemplifies how thoughtful planning, community partnerships, and passionate educators can transform limited space into a thriving ecosystem of learning. As the program continues to evolve, it remains rooted in its original purpose: cultivating not only plants, but curiosity, responsibility, resilience, and lifelong skills in every student who passes through its gates.

