

Elementary Students Participate in Planting a Chestnut Oak Tree in Colchester

In February 2017, the Colchester Garden Club sent an email to the Director of Teaching and Learning in the Colchester School System to inquire whether one of the schools would be interested in our club's oak tree donation. The very next day a reply arrived with the names of two teachers who were excited about the opportunity to plant a new tree on the school grounds and create a unique learning experience for their students of the "Beautify Our School" production company. After two meetings including one with the teachers, school administrators, other staff and the Public Works Director, everyone agreed a new Oak Tree on school grounds would be welcomed.

The Beautifying Our School Production company is one of a number of HOT School Production Companies which enhances the school curriculum at Jack Jackter Intermediate School. The Connecticut Higher Order Thinking (HOT) Schools Program has been in place since 1994 and served over 47 schools in all congressional districts. "The HOT program builds higher-order thinking skills in students and prepares them to be successful learners and contributors in the 21st Century through three core components: strong arts, arts integration, and democratic practice. The HOT Approach, reflected in a school's commitment to child centered, experiential, arts integrated teaching and learning weaves best practices in arts in education with present-day needs and experiences of urban, suburban, and rural school communities. HOT Schools cultivate a school culture in which purposeful activities support choice, voice, participation, and responsibility, promoting connection and contribution to celebrate the unique voice of each member of the school community." Source: <https://higherorderthinkingschools.org>.

Although we did not meet these 3rd, 4th and 5th grade students until the planting ceremony in June, we contributed materials to the teachers to create this unique learning experience associated with our tree donation. It began with the loan of the Native Oak Tree exhibit created by Jane Waugh placed in the display case to excite students about the new tree coming to their school. We provided information on the importance of oak trees to the environment, descriptions of 10 native oak trees for the students to narrow the options to three for us to make the final selection. The students decided to develop an online voting ballot and engage all of the students, teachers and staff in the democratic process to help select a tree with the top choices being: Chestnut Oak, Scarlett Oak and White Oak. (Note: It seems the Chestnut Oak being a food source for black bears influenced many of the students' votes). We provided celebration ideas from the Arbor Day Foundation <https://www.arborday.org/celebrate/celebration-ideas.cfm> to be considered. We worked with the teachers and staff on site selection where the tree would eventually provide shade on the far side of the recreation field in proximity to the schoolyard perimeter for wildlife value. The teachers organized an activity with students to plant acorns to start their own oak trees.

While our club representatives worked on the tree's purchase, delivery and with the town on plans for planting, the students and teachers worked on plans for the tree ceremony. Our planting date was delayed multiple times due to the wet Spring. Finally, on June 14th the tree was planted before the school day began and the Beautifying Our School production company held their dedication ceremony by their new Chestnut Oak Tree with several classes in attendance. The ceremony included information about the school's journey for the tree donation, reading an original poem and a violin solo of "Over the Rainbow". The Colchester Garden Club transported gallon jugs of water so students of Beautifying Our School could take part in the ceremonial watering of the tree. A maintenance manual was created and presented to the school which included information and care instructions for the Chestnut Oak, as well as Apple Trees, in support of a school planting project the year before. The manual also included sections on invasive and native plants, gardening for wildlife, write-ups on several garden maintenance techniques, garden planning suggestions, plant lists, and several articles on the value of nature and gardening for children in anticipation of future gardening-related projects. The school will place a stone memorial at the base of the tree that will read:

Chestnut Oak *Quercus Prinus*
Native Oak Project 2017

Donated by Colchester Garden Club and The Federated Garden Clubs of Connecticut, Inc.

Through this endeavor we appreciated what the school's parent handbook shares: "Jack Jackter Intermediate School is always working to develop strong bonds and working relationships with community organizations." While we did not interact with the students directly, we know our actions had impact from the excitement, enthusiasm and pride the students displayed.

To learn more about Connecticut's HOT Schools see brochure:

https://higherorderthinkingschools.org/files/6814/5400/5510/HOT_Schools_Brochure.pdf

- Katherine M. Kosiba, Colchester Garden Club-President, Advanced Master Gardener