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Maria Shriver Helps in School Garden Makeover

CSGN, WG Host

Extreme Garden Makeover

By Paul Simonds

The television show "Extreme Makeover" usually features a family who has sustained such tragedy or turmoil they are selected to receive a brand new home. A design team and builders come in and demolish their existing house and build from scratch. On Sat. Oct. 21, another sort of "Extreme Makeover" took place at Locke High School in Los Angeles; except this time the family, designers, and builders were all replaced by students, faculty and community volunteers. Sponsored by the California School Garden Network (CSGN), which is spearheaded by WG, the "Extreme Garden Makeover" was a monumental success for a community whose students were determined to beautify their school.

"All of our students are very excited about [the new garden]," said Dr. Frank Wells, principal of Locke High School. "I am thrilled this garden will become a part of our school's community, that our students will have this positive safe place in their lives."

The event kicked off the inaugural California School Garden Week (Oct. 21-27), as proclaimed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger earlier in the month, where schools throughout the state participated in special garden activities and events to celebrate the success of school gardens and to raise awareness for programs, support systems and resources.

To open the festive work-day, California's first lady, Maria Shriver and California Secretary of Agriculture, A.G. Kawamura, spoke briefly on the significance of CSGN, school gardens and highlighted the young people and volunteers who helped make Locke's garden become a reality.

"The California School Garden Network is such an incredible resource and really a one-stop shop for schools, teachers, community leaders and families to learn about school and community gardens," said Shriver, honorary chair of CSGN. "People can go to the Web site (www.csgn.org) to learn how to create their own garden, maintain and sustain it and apply for grants. It's really important that this information is easily accessible, which ultimately will lead to an increase in successful gardens throughout our state."

More than 100 volunteers planted seedlings, trimmed trees and put the finishing touches on Locke's "Sanctuary."

The previously-existing garden was primarily the work of community volunteers and students. With support from CSGN, and funding from Western Growers, the "Extreme Garden Makeover" helped the students transform their half-acre plot into a beautiful, thriving garden affectionately named The Sanctuary, after the school's mascot (Saints).

The Sanctuary includes a variety of themed gardens, including: "A Slave's Garden," overflowing with vegetables historically associated with African Americans from the Civil War era; "An Heirloom Vegetable Garden," emphasizing the myriad colors, tastes and endless variety in everyday produce; "A Jurassic Garden," filled with plants that have been on the earth since the time of the dinosaurs such as Cycads, ferns, horse-tails, palms and assorted grasses; "The Lure of the Butterfly," attracting specific insect-friends by planting foods that attract them; "A Native American Garden," including many different kinds of squash, pumpkins, gourds, purple, red, and white corn.

These gardens will not just focus on the activity of planting, but will tie in lessons on history and the cultures of California and the world. Math, science and ESL classes will utilize the garden as an outdoor classroom and laboratory as well. School gardens offer many benefits to the host school, not the least of which is an abundance of learning opportunities for students.

"We are excited that when the garden is planted we will have an area for an outdoor classroom where teachers can use the garden to teach math, art, science or any other discipline," said Wells.

The "Extreme Garden Makeover" was also highlighted by 25 booths at the interactive garden resource fair, which provided opportunities for families, administrators and community leaders to gain a better understanding of volunteerism, school gardens, and healthy living. Free resources and information were given away, along with fresh fruits, vegetables and nuts, courtesy of Western Growers and the Fresh Produce and Floral Council.

CSGN also unveiled its new book, "Gardens for Learning: Creating and Sustaining Your School Garden," which is available at no cost to California schools. This comprehensive guidebook, for which Shriver wrote the foreword, is an instructional resource for teachers, parents and schools interested in creating a garden. "Gardens for Learning" was developed by a team of experienced garden educators, nutritionists, state officials and other garden experts. More information on the guidebook is available at www.csgn.org.

CSGN came together through the passion of its members, including WG, in dedication to having a garden in every California school. These public / private educational and governmental agencies have combined efforts to develop a resource for teachers and educators seeking information about growing and sustaining a school garden for students.

Toward the end of the hit television show "Extreme Makeover" the host unveils the new home for the selected family. Their house stands as a beacon for everyone to see. Likewise as the festivities concluded at Locke High School, their new Sanctuary stood as a beacon for the State of California, showing what can happen when a community works toward a common goal. The Sanctuary is alive and thriving — thanks to the efforts of Locke's student body, community volunteers and CSGN.