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MONARCH WAYSTATION AT BEAR BRANCH ELEMENTARY

by Merrie Decker

Montgomery County Master Gardener

Bear Branch Elementary School, Magnolia ISD, sponsors two Junior Master Gardening (JMG) clubs on the campus with help and guidance from Montgomery County Master Gardeners:

- 4th and 5th graders meet Mondays at 7:30am to grow vegetables from seed in the greenhouse and work with nectar/host plants in their Butterflies and Blooms Garden.
- Kindergarten classes participate in monthly presentations, garden in the greenhouse and plant vegetables in raised beds.

Bear Branch's program began in 2004 thanks to then-Principal Susan Ward's enthusiastic passion for gardening and enriching students' lives through nature. With support of the PTO and Parent Communication Committee, a classroom-sized greenhouse and a garden all teachers could utilize became a reality.

On hand to help has been the Texas A&M Agrilife/Master Gardener Association's Junior Master Gardening Program, which engages children in hands-on experiences to develop a love of gardening and appreciation for the environment while cultivating the mind. (JMGkids.org). Support has come from many quarters:

- Garden sponsors/teachers Carla Allen and Sue Buchholz work with Master Gardener Merrie Decker to plan activities that teach various gardening aspects.
- Teachers and parents were trained by Montgomery County Master Gardeners and the project was incorporated into science, art, music and Language Arts curriculums at each grade level.
- Sara Simpson's Gifted and Talented students outfitted the campus for gardening as their Community Future Problem Solvers project (Emergency Green: Watch Us Grow!).

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- Parent and community support, plus teacher and student-led fundraisers provided funding.
- Parents assembled the greenhouse, hooked up the sprinkler system, lowered tables to accommodate the youngest students and provided a slab, handicap access sidewalks, storage building, tools, soil/mulch, and a gigantic, custom-designed butterfly statue for the garden center.
- The Montgomery County Beautification Association, Home Depot, Boy Scouts and Girl Scout troops provided plants, trellises, benches and arbors while kindergarteners decorated stepping stones.



An eyesore site that collected debris evolved into a tranquil garden area used daily for contemplation, inspiration and education. It later became home to a wind chime memorial dedicated to beloved music educator Mrs. Tarver.

Carla Allen notes the Butterfly Garden "gives students a personal connection with protecting the environment." Monarchs will lay eggs only on the milkweed plant, a native resource now declining due to widespread use of herbicides and urban sprawl.

Principal Mrs. Holly Ray supports the gardens, allowing JMG members to share garden updates during morning announcements. As two JMG members explain:

- Haley, 4th grade: *"Helping butterflies is magical. Watching them grow on milkweed is one of the most spectacular things you'll ever see."*



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- Melania, 5th grade *"It makes you feel really special to know you are a part of something so cool that helps butterflies as well as students' education."*

The school's now-certified Monarch Waystation Program is a member of [Monarch Watch](#), a non-profit, University of Kansas educational outreach designed to "Create, Conserve, and Protect Monarch Habitats."

- **For more information on the Bear Branch Elementary School program, contact Caroline M. Cruz, County Extension Agent - Urban Youth Development, 936-539-824; cmcruz@ag.tamu.edu.**
- **Additional coverage: [Conroe Courier: "Master Gardener Kids Create Monarch Waystation"](#)**