

# A Green Thumb School

*Mr. Dan was the man with the plan. He liked to work with his hands.  
So he planted some seeds, cleaned up the weeds, and spread dirt and sand.  
Now we have many flowers that we look at for hours.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT M. PEACOCK

This little ditty above, accompanied by hand-drawn illustrations, comes courtesy of Chimneyrock Elementary second graders. The children wanted to honor Dan Edmiston, the teacher who spearheads an incredible garden project at the Cordova public school.

Begun only a year after the school opened in 1990, and dedicated on Earth Day in 1993, six distinctive gardens are featured at the elementary school. The 25-acre campus includes a woodland area, a nature trail, bird and butterfly sanctuaries, a sensory garden, and an agricultural site. Beds of gorgeous flowers and a variety of trees surround the school.

As the precocious second graders pointed out, Mr. Dan was the man with the plan. What prompted the veteran teacher's walk on the wild side?

"This whole area of Cordova used to be in the country," explains the fourth-grade teacher, who has 21 years of teaching experience. "But the city is



**top:** "They have an ownership here because they helped plant some of these gardens," says Dan about Chimneyrock students. The kids plant, weed, and mulch with help from parents and teachers. **above:** Students show their appreciation through artwork.



moving out this way, so large areas of trees have been bulldozed.

"It's wonderful to be able to take kids right outside your door for a field trip," says Dan. A nature trail leads to a woodland area with seating for outdoor classes. Several ponds provide visuals for lessons on tadpoles and such. Native-wildflower projects show how specific plants attract butterflies and birds. An agricultural area demonstrates how food originates from some place other than the grocery store, and beds of blooming flowers and leafy trees bring home seasonal changes.



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"It's wonderful to be able to take kids right outside your door for a field trip."

Dan Edmiston,  
Director of Environmental Studies

### Nutty Lessons

On this day, the school's youngest horticulturists gather to reap what they've sown at "Roper's Farm Yard," dedicated to the school's principal, Sherry Roper. Their faces light with wonder when they uproot their first dirt-encrusted peanut of the season. A teacher, holding up a book, points to an illustration that duplicates the real-life scene. The kids instantly make the connection. They'll never again take another PB&J sandwich for granted.

"The ownership the kids have is the neat thing," Dan says. Not that the kids are the sole caretakers of this horticultural heaven. Dan's plan came to fruition with the help of a willing group of adults. A recent "Weedin', Meetin', and Eatin'" cookout drew about 100 teachers and parents, and the PTA schedules monthly garden workdays.

"The volunteers are just amazing," Dan says. "Some are up here every day. Parents will take their only day off to work with the children in the garden."





**above:** Field journals allow students to record their nature findings.

**left:** Outdoor seating in the woodland area provides inspiration for musical lessons.

### A Garden-variety Education

Learning permeates every single aspect of the beautiful campus. "It's been an education for me too," Dan says. He laughs at the learning curve his garden goals require. "I don't have a background in science or horticulture," he admits. Yet the educator grows ecstatic when he explains the special qualities of the spicebush and its ability to attract a native Tennessee butterfly.

The students, of course, remain the biggest beneficiaries. "Besides keeping nature journals, we do bird studies, plant studies, and insect studies," Dan says. "For example, in the third grade, we teach the life cycle of the monarch butterfly. The first year we planted the milkweed and had monarchs. The whole campus turned out to watch the monarch release."

For Dan, gifts from the garden just keep growing. "There's nothing like being in nature," he says. "I mean, there's just nothing else like it."

Student Josh Chester possesses the same admiration for the man with the plan. "He takes us out on walks and teaches us about nature," says the fourth grader. Then he delivers a kid's highest praise: "He's a good teacher."

Almost as good a teacher as Mother Nature herself.

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