## Success is Growing

## Horticulture Programs Touch all Residents in Southwind District

ERIE, Kan. – Fourth and fifth graders at Erie Elementary had quite a time picking the cool little worms off trays filled with plants. Little did they know they were learning something, too.

The day's lesson: Protecting plants in their school's greenhouse from the critters that slowly suck away the plant's life.

Southwind Extension District horticulture agent Krista Harding worked with the school's teachers in spring, 2012 to grow flowers and vegetables in the greenhouse and sell their goods back to the community.

"And their plan this fall (2012) is to actually grow a salsa garden within that greenhouse, and use the produce directly through the school's lunch program," Harding said.

The program is one of several new programs that Harding has helped start in Allen, Bourbon and Neosho counties, which make up the Southwind Extension District. Before the district was formed, many area residents did not have direct access to a horticulture agent in their community.

"My home office is in Erie, but during the growing season (April through the end of September), I travel to Iola one day and Fort Scott one day to assist clients," Harding said. "It's been kind of interesting. Just in the short period of time, people call in and they say,



'I want to talk to the horticulturist.' I have become the expert in the district in that area."

It's how K-State Research and Extension anticipated districts to operate in the state. County agents have had to be generalists in many areas in the past; moving to a district office allows communities to have direct access to more agents, and more individual time from agents who specialize in just one or two areas.

"I would say that the interest in horticulture in the Southwind district is very high," Harding said. "People are talking with each other on the street, or maybe they're seeing our pictures in the newspaper... People are coming to us for horticulture questions, saying, 'We do have an expert here and we are taking advantage of that."

At Erie Elementary, Harding invited Kansas State horticulturist Alan Stevens to help the young students. Stevens, who works out of the Olathe Research Center near Kansas City, helped set up the greenhouse and pick out plants to grow.

"I wouldn't have had the time to devote solely to

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this type of horticulture program" if not for the district office, Harding said. "It allowed me the opportunity to really help those teachers a long ways."

Since forming the district, Harding said she also has helped expand the Master Gardeners programs in all three counties. Gardeners in Iola have "a beautiful community garden," Harding said, while Master Gardeners in Chanute started their own community garden in 2011. Residents from all three counties have gotten together for educational tours and other activities, Harding said.

"The opportunity is here to have a really strong [district] Master Gardener program," she said. "Anytime we have people that enjoy something like that, they are



Above: Master Gardeners in Iola have established a large community garden on the south end of town.

going to do well at it. So, I just need to become more familiar with the volunteer needs and match master gardeners with those needs to get things accomplished."