

## Pickens students set to begin Prairie Project

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Students will soon brave the winter weather at the Pickens County Career and Technology Center as they pull up invasive plants to prepare the ground for something that was once plentiful in the Upstate but now quite rare — a Piedmont prairie.

It's an ambitious project that will rely on the diverse skills of a variety of students and involve advisers and partners from a handful of state agencies and private groups.

"It is a very robust project," said Cathy Reas Foster, natural resources agent with the Pickens County Extension Service.

Foster wrote the application that won the Career and Technology Center a \$2,500 grant from the state Department of Health and Environmental Control to develop the prairie project. The center was one of eight schools that received grants late last year and were named Champions of the Environment.

The eight were selected out of 55 applicants, said Amanda Ley, coordinator of the Champions of the Environment program.

"The goal of the Champions of the Environment program is to encourage, enable and recognize the implementation of youth environmental education projects that develop awareness, promote behavior change, or improve and protect our water, air and land," Ley said.

Meanwhile project supports are looking forward to what the Piedmont prairie could mean.

"We are excited to be hosting the project and we would hope to see it expand and eventually open it up to the public," said Ken Hitchcock, director of the Career and Technology Center.

The project is called Prairie Project: Restoring and Preserving a Piedmont Prairie Ecosystem. It will involve transforming about a 1/3-acre at the center into a prairie, Foster said.

Before Europeans arrived on the scene much of the Piedmont and coastal areas were covered in prairies, said Dr. Bill Stringer, president Native Plant Society, Upstate Chapter, and a retired Clemson University agronomist.

"They don't have them now so the question is, what happened?" said Stringer, who is a key adviser for the project. "The answer is before Europeans came the Indians had custody of the land, they did regular burning."

Through controlled burning and by letting wildfires burn, Native Americans were able to suppress forests and maintain verdant prairies teeming with wildlife, he said.

But European settlers turned prairies into fields of cotton and other crops. Fields that eventually were left fallow grew into forests, he said.

Students from a wide range of center programs — agricultural mechanics, horticulture, environmental science, carpentry and Secondary Transition Education and Employability Program — will participate in the project, according to the grant application.

“One of the things that is so cool about this project is that it involves so many different students at the career center,” said Beth Grumbles, a teacher whose students will be in the thick of things. “We will be reaching so many different types of students and types of people all through this one project.”

Beyond students others that will be involved in some fashion will be the Pickens County Beautification and Environmental Advisory Committee and the S.C. Native Plant Society, who will act as advisers, and the Pickens County Extension Service, Pickens County Stormwater Partners, Pickens County Soil and Water District/NRCS, state Department of Natural Resources and the S.C. Botanical Garden, who will be partners, Foster said.

“Everyone kind of pitches in a little bit here and there on what we’re doing for the project,” she said.

The project grew out of conversations between foster and Grumbles, whose students were involved in volunteering for environmental projects. They were the ones who labeled storm drains in the Liberty area with messages urging residents to properly dispose of oil.

“I just happen to see this perfect spot of land at the career center that could be restored into a prairie ecosystem. So we just started brainstorming about it,” Foster said.

That was last spring. Once the school district approved using the land for the project, Foster submitted the grant application.

Students have already collected seeds from Stringer’s prairies and are growing plugs in the greenhouse. The next task is to prepare the ground using no-till methods, Foster said. Students will pull up exotic and invasive weeds. Grass mulch will be spread. Come spring, students will plant the plugs as well as native grass seeds and wildflowers.

The Piedmont Prairie project is expected to give a glimpse of the state’s past, Stringer said.

“Here is an opportunity to have a living history lesson,” he said.

The project also will provide a rich habitat for wildlife for birds and other creatures, he said.

The prairie will take several years to establish, Foster said. The project calls for a trail with learning stations that focus on weather, wildlife, wildflowers and water protection.

“The key to this proposal was that prairies protect land, air and water,” she said.

Native plants don’t require watering or fertilizer and pesticides, she said. The deep roots prevent erosion and allow rainwater to percolate into the aquifer.

“We want to bring attention and education about native plants and a Piedmont prairie ecosystem,” Foster said. “A lot of it is trying to use this prairie as an outdoor learning lab.”

Hitchcock, the center's director, said students are excited to get started.

"The big lesson is to protect our environment and our natural resources and also to understand the history and what Upstate South Carolina use to be like hundreds of years ago before European settlers came," he said.

But beyond the educational value and beyond the environmental value, there's another reason to restore and preserve a Piedmont prairie, Stringer said.

The mixture of colorful native wildflowers with the texture and color of a variety of native grasses is quite the sight, he said.

"It's spectacularly beautiful."