

## Project Sunflower at Villa Maria School, Stamford CT

By the students of Villa Maria School

During the month of March, Villa Maria students planted three sunflower seeds each in up-cycled “mini-greenhouses” created from reused plastic milk jugs. After planting the seeds, we then placed the 65 mini-greenhouses outside to brave our cold winter weather. Students soon observed sunflower plants emerging from the soil! The “winter sowed” sprouts grew steadily, surviving freezing temperatures and were ready for planting on Earth Day, April 22, 2022!





In partnership with The Bartlett Arboretum and Pollinator Pathway of Stamford, Villa Maria School celebrated Earth Day with an outdoor presentation by Gabrielle-Marie Walther from the Bartlett Arboretum and a dedication ceremony to formally announce our membership with the Pollinator Pathway. Each student was presented with an Earth Day Stewardship Certificate, transplanted their sunflower seedling in the Villa Maria front garden, and took their remaining seedlings home to plant.



Two months later we were delighted to see the sunflower plants in bloom with some of the flowers towering to the height of the school! In addition to being a welcoming symbol of peace and beauty, the sunflowers attracted birds we hadn't seen before, including goldfinches and woodpeckers. Furthermore, we saw a host of pollinators consisting of butterflies, moths, several different types of bees, ants and more! Students were thrilled to observe and learn how the insects were pollinating and how birds, squirrels and chipmunks were using the sunflowers as a food source.





As fall neared, the leaves of the sunflower plants began to brown; they no longer stood tall facing the sun. Stems broke as busy squirrels gathered the sunflower seeds and buried them for a winter feast. We decided it was time to put our garden beds to sleep for the winter, so we cut down the sunflower stalks. Not wanting to deprive our visitors from the few remaining seeds, we tied the stalks together and added them to our fall pumpkin and mum display. We were thrilled to see the birds had discovered the new location and ate the remaining seeds!





Students are now planning a “Planting Calendar” and calculating from the last frost of 2023 to determine the best time to winter sow our second batch of sunflower plants. Since we observed Monarch caterpillars in our garden this fall, we are also planning to winter sow milkweed to feed the Monarchs.

Villa Maria School would like to send a big thank you to the Bartlett Arboretum & Gardens for their continued support of our gardens and programs and to Pollinator Pathway Stamford for their generous contribution of pollinator plants. Villa students are excited to grow our school garden and help create a promising future for our pollinators!