

## NRCS Helps Plant Seeds of Hope at Tribal Healing Garden

By: Joanna Pope, NRCS Public Affairs Specialist

A small seed can grow into something great. That is the symbolic idea behind the AiKiRuti Healing Garden. AiKiRuti – pronounced I-key-ru-dee – is a project started by members of the Winnebago Tribe. AiKiRuti, which means “helping hand,” hopes to be a helping hand in fighting drug and alcohol abuse in the Winnebago Tribe and its northeast Nebraska community.

The Healing Garden was started in 2002 when over 100 varieties of indigenous plants significant to the Winnebago people were planted at the one-acre site in Winnebago, Neb. Members of the community worked to prepare the site for planting. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) supplied seed for the garden through the Nebraska Loess Hill RC&D and the NRCS Plant Materials Center in Manhattan, Kan. The Plant Materials Center has plans to do additional seeding.

Mark Janzen, plant materials specialist at the Plant Materials Center, said the idea behind a healing garden is that plants can bring healing and hope to a community.

“These plants will help focus Tribal members back towards their cultural heritage and help them identify the significance that plants had in their cultural history,” Janzen said.

Members of the Winnebago Tribe have become enthusiastic about learning the role plants played in their cultural history. Local children volunteered to plant buffalo grass at the Healing Garden’s Tee Pee site. Ce Ce Earth, a member of the AiKiRuti organization said this provided an opportunity for Winnebago children to restore a piece of their Tribe’s culture.



Joanna Pope, NRCS

*Bob Starck, volunteer with the AiKiRuti Healing Garden, shows plans of the Healing Garden to Constance Miller, NRCS State Forester.*



Joanna Pope, NRCS

*Ce Ce Earth and Bob Starck, who both volunteer with the AiKiRuti Healing Garden planning group, stand on the recently completed walkway through the garden.*

“These kids rode their bikes to the garden to check on their grass. They were really excited to see how well it was growing. It is now one of the most sacred sites in the garden,” Earth said.

The AiKiRuti organization wants to build a Cultural Learning/Visitors Center. The center will provide a place of cultural discovery for members of the Winnebago Tribe, and provide an opportunity for non-Indians to participate in cultural and educational activities alongside members of the Tribe.

“It can take a long time for a garden like this to really start to look like something. But if you look closely you can see some beauty and hope emerging,” Earth said.

Hope is what has kept this project moving forward. AiKiRuti can also be interpreted as meaning “a hand reaching out to help.” Members of the Winnebago Tribe are hoping this Healing Garden will soon live up to its name. ♦



*It can take a long time for a garden like this to really start to look like something. But if you look closely you can see some beauty and hope emerging.*

**- Ce Ce Earth,  
Winnebago Tribe**



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