

## Ridgewood students help grow community garden at Orchard School - NorthJersey.com

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They frolicked in the grass. They wet their hands in the fountain. They drew on their "tree-sels" (tree-shaped easels).



*Orchard School teacher Judi Malhotra (left) unlocks the door to let Ridgewood High School students into Orchard's new community garden.*

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Orchard School teacher Judi Malhotra (left) unlocks the door to let Ridgewood High School students into Orchard's new community garden.

Running around Orchard School's new community art garden, the only such garden in the district, students were having fun being children. For several supervising teachers, it was a satisfying sight - especially since the students had helped assemble their own play place.

"This isn't based off a bunch of adults' ideas. It's based off of the creativity of the children," said Orchard third-grade teacher Erin Heider.

On that sunny Thursday morning last week, the colorful backyard garden was a pretty sight. But the real beauty was how the children were learning as they played. Like a smaller combination of New Jersey's Liberty Science Center and Grounds for Sculpture, a 42-acre public art garden, the Orchard garden featured a variety of outdoor sculptures and creativity stations.

A free-standing red door whimsically welcomes incoming visitors. A rainbow quilt of umbrella tops, minus their metal bones, billows in the breeze. Paint-splattered shutters and donated garden hose segments-turned-flower-stems provides fences and brick walls with homey decorations. A treasure chest stores pieces of plastic pipe that children build sculptures with.

"Be Inspired By Nature To Create," a prominent sign in the garden reads.

While the students did much of the work, the project's mastermind was Judy Malhotra, a sculptor and Orchard's art specialist.

Malhotra said her aim was to create a school garden that gets used, a place that offers children physical exercise and a creative outlet instead of just being beautiful. Already, that dream is materializing.

"They see the possibilities. Not everything is a piece of paper," she said, noting that Orchard teachers are starting to use the garden "more and more," sometimes bringing students outside to write poetry or read.

It was obvious from their play that the children liked the garden, too.