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Garden Day blooms at Rancocas Nature Center



Dorann Weber

Camillia Hughes, 4, of Mount Holly, and her brother Danny Meisner, 11, enjoy the koi pond Sunday, August 3, 2015, at the third annual Garden Day at the Rancocas Valley Nature Center in Westampton.





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By Susan Sherry Miller Correspondent

WESTAMPTON — It's the peak of the summer growing season and a handful of master gardeners came out Sunday afternoon to showcase the bounty and the beauty at the third annual Garden Day at the Rancocas Nature Center.

Working alongside the knowledgeable gardening experts were a host of enthusiastic novices; volunteers who just can't get enough of the lovely nature center on 130 acres just off Rancocas Road. It's land that once served as a settlement for Quakers and Lenni Lenape Indians, and it's adjacent to a place called Timbuctoo, a former colony of freed slaves.

The weather was perfect for the event: warm and sunny, but not too humid. Visitors at Garden Day had a chance to hear experts discuss the importance of native plants and to find out which of those plants are edible. Kids learned how food goes from the seed pack to the supper table. There were various wildlife gardens to explore as well as a dragonfly pond, where several noisy bullfrogs made their presence known regularly.

To escape the heat, attendees stopped inside the nature center to see a photography club exhibit or they took to the various self-guided nature trails on the site, where large hardwood trees — sassafras, maple and oak — provided welcome shade.

There's also a newly created Monarch Butterfly Waystation on the property, the brainchild of Eastampton resident Brittany Klaus, a recent graduate of Burlington County Institute of Technology in Medford.

Klaus, who is planning to study criminal justice at Rowan College at Burlington County in the fall, decided to establish a butterfly garden at the center as a project associated with her Girl Scout Gold Award. After careful research, she planted milkweeds and other

nectar-producing plants as a sustainable habitat for monarch butterflies as they migrate annually through the area on their way to Mexico.

“I’ve never done anything like this,” Klaus said, explaining that while she liked spending time outdoors, she didn’t know much about plants.

Toni Price, co-chair of the Friends of Rancocas Nature Center and one of the master gardeners, said she was impressed with Klaus’ determination to learn about the native plants needed for the butterfly habitat. “She planned for its sustainability,” Price said. “She had good insight, and she worked hard. The plants will come back every year, and they’ll multiply.”

Klaus said she hopes to install a bench at the garden so she (and others) can sit and watch the migration of the monarchs this fall.

Price, a beekeeper who lives in Tabernacle, bustled about on Sunday, directing most of the activities at Garden Day. At one point, she stopped to pose with Smokey the Bear, who was there with his friends from the New Jersey Forest Fire Service. She was proud to direct visitors to her history garden, where she attempted to replicate some of the crops that had been cultivated between 1700 and 1850, when the freed slaves and American Indians lived on the land.

It was a less successful endeavor than she had hoped for: Field corn, collards and okra were barely busting through the soil, but an odd crop called whippoorwill cowpea was flourishing. “The main thing is, I learned from this,” Price said with a laugh. “I’ll research it and continue to try next year.”

She and the other members of the FRNC have been working hard to raise awareness about the center. The group formed in January 2013 when the New Jersey Audubon Society abruptly announced it would close the financially troubled center. The Friends have run the center independently for the past two and a half years, through a partnership with the Burlington County Board of Freeholders, New Jersey State Park Service’s Division of Parks and Forestry, the township of Westampton and the Rancocas Conservancy.

The FRNC has been holding fundraisers and seeking donations for the center whenever possible. There are plans for a handicapped trail and a pavilion, among other things. “There are so many things going on here,” Price said. “Our programs are our best assets.”

To find out more or to volunteer at the Rancocas Nature Center, contact Toni Price at lavender.toni@gmail.com.