

Burlington County Times

Event aims to cultivate interest in Rancocas Nature Center

Posted: Sunday, August 3, 2014 7:00 pm | Updated: 9:23 pm, Sun Aug 3, 2014.

Event aims to cultivate interest in Rancocas Nature Center By Steven Hart Staff Writer

WESTAMPTON — As you would expect from the name, Garden Day at the Rancocas Nature Center was all about the care and cultivation of growing things.

But along with the outdoor talks on beekeeping, wildlife gardening, herb gardening and children's crafts, the Sunday event aimed to grow public interest in the Rancocas Nature Center, which supporters tout as one of the best kept secrets in Burlington County.

"We try to do four events a year, and this is our summer event," said Lavonne Bebler Johnson, of Willingboro, a member of the Friends of the Rancocas Nature Center. "We wanted to show off all the beauties of the gardens here at Rancocas. We've got the flower gardens, we've got the dragonfly pond, we have the children's herb garden — there's a little something for everyone here."

The center previously was managed by the New Jersey Audubon Society, which announced late in 2012 that it would close the site for budget reasons. It held off long enough for the Friends to organize and begin fundraising efforts.

Since March of last year, the center has been managed by a partnership involving the state (which owns the land), the county government and Westampton. The Friends work as fundraisers and advocates.



Carl Kosola/Staff Photographer

Garden Day

Hedy Bauer leads a group of people on a Wildflower tour during Garden Day at the Rancocas Nature Center in Wesampton Sunday afternoon.

Located off Rancocas Road, the center has 2.7 miles of hiking trails through densely wooded and sometimes marshy areas. The property reaches all the way to Rancocas Creek and neighboring Timbuctoo, marking the site of a former community built by free African Americans and escaped slaves in the 19th century.

The center runs a day camp for children and sponsors events meant to highlight the site's natural beauty.

Toni Price, who runs the Busy Bee Farm in Tabernacle with her husband, Steve, said the Friends volunteers all have a special attachment to the area.

"Our mission here is very unique," she said. "We have the free black community of Timbuctoo right adjacent, we have Quaker farming and Native American culture that took place right here, and our goal is to educate the public about how they survived here. I think that makes this place really unique."

A tent near the picnic area and children's herb garden offered a chance to peer into the inner workings of a beehive, while master gardeners fielded questions about gardening in suburbia.

One of the gardeners, Marilyn Fishman, of Moorestown, explained that the master gardener concept grew out of a program founded in 1973 by the Washington State University Cooperative Extension because the expanding suburbs brought questions about gardening and horticulture in urban and suburban areas.

"The typical questions we get vary by the season," Fishman said. "In the spring people will ask, what are these weeds in my lawn and how do I get rid of them, the how do I plant my vegetables. And then in the summer we get a lot of question about what's eating my vegetables, and what weed is this and what do I do about it, and what bug is this and what do I do about it. And then in the fall we get bugs, weeds, and how do I winter my plants."

While adults explored the fine points of gardening, children enjoyed the chance to explore the trails and run through the meadows.

Krista Mucciolo, a Delran resident and member of the Friends, said she has been bringing her children to the center for the past five years. "They love it here," she said. "The day camp is amazing. They get to be outdoors instead of sitting at home playing video games."

She said the news that New Jersey Audubon would abandon the center made her spring into action.

"It didn't take me but a second to realize I needed to become a board member and start raising money," she said. "I love this place."