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Rotary-Rutgers initiative enables garden seed growing

Rotary District 7510 Central NJ had the vision of creating enabling gardens for hands-on club and community service in its five counties of Somerset, Hunterdon, Union, Middlesex and Mercer.

Written by
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Nearly three years ago, Rotary District 7510 Central NJ had the vision of creating enabling gardens for hands-on club and community service in its five counties of Somerset, Hunterdon, Union, Middlesex and Mercer. The district approached Rutgers University, and its entities, New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension, and partnered to implement the “Growing Lives One Seed at a Time,” garden initiative. The Rotary-Rutgers initiative is creating barrier-free accessible gardens built with modifications.

Since the launch of the Initiative at Rutgers University in March 2012, Rotary clubs and involvement with the initiative and connection within the community are growing. In Middlesex County the Woodbridge-Perth Amboy Rotary Club provided seed money through a district grant to the garden on the Cook campus Floriculture Greenhouse Horticultural Therapy and Education space of Rutgers University.

The first phase, a rain garden in the courtyard, will transform an undeveloped tract of land. The rain garden will meet key needs of the space while providing a new educational tool for horticulture and landscape design classes. It will also add a new element for groups who want to use the space to run programs that serve the community. A day of service is scheduled July 17 with Rutgers faculty, staff, Rotary and friends to help plant and install the garden.

A second location, a pilot at AristaCare at Cedar Oaks in South Plainfield, harvested sensory benefits for senior patients through indoor plant activities funded and facilitated by Rotarians from Branchburg, Edison, Metuchen, South River-East Brunswick, Woodbridge-Perth Amboy and Interact Clubs from J.P. Stevens and Edison high schools, and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Both the Jersey Grown and New Jersey and Landscape Association have supported the districtwide project.

In Mercer County, the garden is at Mercer County Community College (MCCC) in partnership with Allies Inc., a nonprofit in Hamilton serving students and adults with developmental disabilities. At this site, the Robbinsville-Hamilton Sunrise Club is helping out at the “farm” in the gardens where student groups and adults grow vegetables and herbs and learn vocation.

Rotary, through its leadership in the county, is expanding awareness about the project to its neighboring Rotary clubs to help grow the Rotary Committee to grow the Enabling Garden Farm program. The enabling garden at MCCC is the only site currently providing active Horticultural Therapy under the direction of a horticultural therapist, MaryAnne McMillan, who is also president of the American Horticultural Therapy Association, a 501(c)3 that sets the standards of practice for horticultural therapists. Rotarian Laura DePrado presented the project at the 40th anniversary conference of the AHTA in Minneapolis last October. As a result, the project has expanded beyond New Jersey and adopted by the Rotary Club of Squaw Peak, in Arizona, and is implementing an accessible, barrier-free courtyard for children with traumatic brain injuries in partnership with the chamber of commerce.

In Union County, Rotarians from several clubs are helping to expand the existing committee to plan a day for seniors with plant activities while seeking a location for the enabling garden. The first project was a successful vegetable garden in raised beds to bring gardening to the special-needs community of the Community Access Unlimited group home property in Roselle.

In Hunterdon County, renovations and landscaping at the RCE Office in the county government office complex have occurred in partnership with the county Department of Corrections Labor Assist Program, which has helped provide the labor. Master gardeners have facilitated new horticulture outreach with several nonprofits in the county, including Freedom House and Enable Inc. Rotarians have become master gardeners, and master gardeners have become Rotarians.

In Somerset County, there are three locations, two of which are actively growing — Richard Hall Community Mental Health Clinic, Raritan Valley Community College and Carrier Clinic. At Richard Hall, the Enabling Garden Pergola was installed on June 12 in the courtyard. Funding from Rotary District 7510 and the Rotary Clubs of Somerville-Bridgewater, Bound Brook, Hillsborough and Plainfield-North Plainfield and Rotarian business owners made possible the shade pergola installed by Archadeck of Morris County.



*The pergola at Richard Hall Community Mental Health Clinic will provide shade and expand use and activities.
(PHOTO COURTESY OF RHCMHC)*



Standing in the courtyard at Richard Hall Community Mental Health Clinic (RHCMHC) on June 12 are (from left) Joe Horner, Hillsborough Rotary Club; Nick Polanin, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Somerset County; Brian Auger, Bound Brook Club; Laura DePrado, Branchburg Rotary Club; Mike Cohen, Branchburg Rotary Club; Peter Twaite, Archadeck; Donna Gapas, clinical director, RHCMHC; Nicci Spinazzola, executive director, RHCMHC; Dr. Tasneem Shaikh, medical director, RHCMHC; Glen Carman, Bound Brook Rotary Club; Joan Pritchard, Bound Brook Rotary Club; Patrick Vitale, finance director, RHCMHC; Leora Shay, senior program coordinator, Somerset County Park Commission; and Cyndy Massone, executive secretary, RHCMHC. (PHOTO COURTESY OF LAURA DePRADO)

At RVCC, the Rotary Club of Branchburg provided seed money to develop a designated area in front of the Conference Center. A committee composed of RVCC faculty, Rotaract students, Branchburg Rotary Club and Rutgers Department of Landscape Architecture and graduates held a series of meetings and design workshop that has resulted in a tangible plan undergoing further revision. This site will include a new partnership with the Boy Scouts of America Patriots Path Council to make possible Scout and Eagle Scout projects as part of the development of the enabling garden phases.

The Carrier Clinic East Mountain School, in partnership with the Montgomery-Rocky Hill Rotary Club, piloted growing and connecting to a garden by growing vegetables and flowers in raised beds. The successful pilot expanded curriculum, the possibility of having experienced a sense of accomplishment and the growing of a life “one seed at a time.”

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