



## After-school garden club is growing success

Laura DePrado, Community Contributor Published 12:00 p.m. ET Nov. 20, 2017



**In The Garden Club**, children engage in hands-on activities with purpose and meaning, learn about cycles of nature, seasonal rhythms, and feel safe to respond to an abundant supply of plant materials and life stages from seed to harvest, and from birth to maturity. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Laura DePrado)

Horticultural Therapy provides an opportunity for children to work cooperatively with other children while learning new skills and new information. Horticulture, the growing of plants, is also an activity where children can learn and grow.

Specifically designed horticultural activities promote healthy interactions and developmental growth in a child and creates a fun, engaging, nonjudgmental environment where both children and plants thrive and bloom.

Since September, students enrolled in the Garden Club, facilitated by me as part of an after-school program at the Middle Earth 21st Century Community Learning Center Program (CCLC) at Smalley Elementary School in Bound Brook, will tell you no green thumbs are required.

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Material for every session is rolled in on my plant cart, which moves freely about and allows any student the freedom to get up, get moving and get growing. Plants are alive and dynamic, and so are the options for the kids in the Garden Club, no matter the nature subject: Monarch butterflies, the host plant needed for its survival, butterfly weed, seed pods to explore, and seeds to gather, collect and label for storage and planting next year, pumpkins, flowers, flower arranging, lavender, mums, mint, annuals, perennials, ornamental trees and shrubs, bees, pollinators, leaves, veins, stems, roots, botany, to name a few.

Beautiful finished projects of nature connection, learning and expression come to life by every student through planting, painting, drawing, growing, propagating, cutting and arranging.



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In the Garden Club, students teach each other, share, assume leadership and mentoring roles, and experience positive social interactions and collaboration. Skills learned in gardening activities are transferrable to other settings and offer the experience of success that reinforces a sense of mastery and heightened self-esteem.

Horticultural therapy provides an engaging setting where activities are customized in a guided way and techniques are applied to the healthy management of behaviors, feelings and relationships.

This is the 11th year that CCLC has been able to provide this safe, structured after-school program to Bound Brook students in grades 3 to 8. The program consists of recreation time, homework help offered by certified teachers and a variety of clubs that allow students to participate in new and healthy experiences.

Clubs include video production, Lego Tech, Culture Clubs, arts and crafts, mindfulness and meditation, yoga and the Garden Club, which is offered for the first time.



CCLC also offers families groups and activities that engage them in learning about their child's time within the program. The project is funded in its entirety with federal funds under the Every Student Succeeds Act, Title IV, Part B, 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC), through a grant agreement with the New Jersey Department of Education.

Middle Earth is a nonprofit community-based organization that has been providing services to at-risk youth for over four decades. Its mission is to provide prevention, intervention and crisis services to individuals, primarily youth, assisting them in developing into responsible and productive members of the community.

"Working with Laura has been one of our more successful partnerships as the students have shown real enthusiasm for her Garden Club," said Middle Earth's executive director, Maria Strada. "They look forward to working with the plants and flowers that she provides each week.

"She has managed to create a learning environment that is as vibrant as the flowers that she brings in and we see the students expressing themselves in positive and healthy ways through gardening. "