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Nature Notes: Children's garden provides learning and growing



Deb Dodds, president of the Stonington Garden Club, inspects spaghetti squash, clinging to cow pen metal frames in the COMO Children's Garden. (Photo by Bill Hobbs)

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By Bill Hobbs, Special to the Times

The lessons that daily come out of the COMO Children's Garden of Stonington are powerful, priceless, and possibly, lifelong.

"For instance, how many kids eat kale?" asked Annette Born. "I watched a little boy pull kale up and eat it, and I thought, "Oh, my gosh! I always rejected kale. But he loved it."

Born, who is co-chair of the Stonington Garden Club with Wanda Sullivan, said the whole premise of the COMO Children's Garden is to teach children about the earth and gardening. "They learn to love things that they grow," she said.

The COMO Children's Garden, where many of these little miracles occur, is located just outside the Borough of Stonington, hidden in between a set of tennis and paddleball courts. The garden is tiny, roughly measuring 60 by 150 feet, but a gem, packed with vegetables, fruits and flowers. It is owned by the Community Center and managed by the garden club, a match that both parties would readily agree is made in heaven.

The Stonington Garden Club will host "An Evening in the Garden" on Friday, Aug. 20, from 5 to 7 p.m. at the COMO Children's Garden at 27 Cutler St. in Stonington.

The event includes cocktails, wine and a garden-inspired silent auction. Proceeds will benefit the club's Community Grant Fund.

Tickets can be purchased online at stoningtongardenclub.org or at the door.

Priscilla Rouquayrol, COMO educational director, for example, is one of the first to admit the relationship is a win-win.

"The garden is a major component of the curriculum for every single childcare or educational program that we have here," she said, adding, "During the school year the garden is used as an outdoor classroom space and learning tool for the curriculum of our nationally accredited preschool and for our COMO Kids (youth ages 5-12 years old) before and after school programming."

Historically, the COMO Children's Garden was established in 1997. However, in 2018, the garden club, led by the driving force of Deb Dodds, who is the current president, combined with an active membership and many passionate volunteers, raised \$26,000 and completed a major renovation.

"It is a true community collaboration and success story," Dodds said.

Ken Geer, a Ledyard stonemason, for example, re-graded the entire garden and provided metal edging for the vegetable garden. Luther Fence of Groton donated the perimeter fencing, and the Stonington Village Improvement Association helped the COMO Children's Garden purchase a tool shed.

Before the renovation, Dodds, who is a self-taught gardener, remembered, "We used to have small, plastic, raised garden beds, 2-3 inches off the ground, and it seemed like 50 percent of what was grown the rabbits ate."

Now, the COMO Children's Garden has 10 raised beds, with 2.5-foot-high sides, filled with rich topsoil and pesticide-free veggies. Varieties growing in these fertile beds include string beans, five kinds of tomatoes, eggplant, baby carrots, Peter Pan squash, Crookneck squash, Spaghetti squash, Walla Walla onions, chives, beets, Swiss chard, and several kinds of peppers, some with funny names, like Big Bertha Pepper, or Mid Lunch Box Sweet Pepper, all planted by children.

Other kid-friendly attractions in the COMO Children's Garden incorporate a beautiful blueberry and strawberry patch, bird-proofed with netting; a miniature pond, with a solar-powered water fountain; three compost bins; a rain barrel; and a pollinator garden.

The garden is full of learning opportunities even beyond the food. "The kids love the pollinator garden, because there's always something in there buzzing or munching, so they can see the insects and learn that some bugs are good and some are not," Dodds said.

Finally, the COMO Children's Garden is an example of how gardens are good for the body, mind, and soul. Children gain knowledge and nutrition, and the community is a better place because the Children's Garden is here.

For the Stonington Garden Club members and volunteers, the COMO Children's Garden teaches children and adults things they can take back to their own gardens and lives. "No matter where you live and how old you are in the Stonington area, this is a place where people can come and garden, and be a part of something special," Dodds said.

Bill Hobbs lives in Stonington. He can be reached for comments at whobbs246@gmail.com.

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