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Community Garden connects people, plants

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Duke Farms opened a Community Garden to provide people with the opportunity to grow produce that is healthy for them in a way that is friendly to the environment

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Community garden plot provides a valuable piece for Horticultural Therapy programming
- The garden is where the five senses are all stimulated

HILLSBOROUGH – If a Community Garden were a puzzle, the 462 “pieces” known as plots at Duke Farms would create a beautiful picture of 500 active gardeners, plants, horticultural therapy and nature growing, interacting, harvesting.

Duke Farms opened a Community Garden in the spring of 2011 to provide people with the opportunity to grow produce that is healthy for them in a way that is friendly to the environment. The garden began with 210 plots, and in 2014 expanded to 462 plots. Garden plots are available in three sizes: 10 by 10 feet, 15 by 15 feet and 15 by 30 feet. People who live and/or work in Somerset County are eligible to participate; commercial enterprises are not eligible to apply at this time. Plots are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. Our gardeners include senior citizens all the way down to toddlers. All are welcome.

Out of the 462 plots, nine are used as educational plots to demonstrate techniques such as seed saving, crop rotation, square-foot gardening and rain gardening. Additionally, there are seven giving gardens (one per garden neighborhood) that are planted and tended strictly for donation to local food banks.

“Our Community Garden is a melding of growing food, sharing information and neighbors helping each other. It is a true community,” said Melissa Almendinger, garden educator, Duke Farms Foundation.

The community garden plot provides a valuable piece for Horticultural Therapy programming. It is a place where the Registered Horticultural Therapist (HTR) can help effect a positive change in the individuals they serve. It is a place where individuals, who might otherwise not have contact with the natural world, can experience the wonder of the garden and how it can be so beneficial to all of us. It is where the five senses are all stimulated. It is also where an individual who is physically challenged can gain strength, where they can work on their fine motor skills (planting seed, for example), or their gross motor skills (digging a hole for that special tomato plant). At Greensleeves Flemington, we work with 12 to 14 individuals with special needs, ages range from 21 into their 50s.

This is the second year in which Greensleeves Flemington Day Program is the caretaker of a 15-by-30 plot at Duke Farms. Extensive gardens are also growing at the Greensleeves Flemington store, where clients with special needs have planted six beds, including flowers, herbs and some vegetables, and are the caretakers. Staff oversee and enjoy learning as well. Greensleeves' Flemington location provides vocational training and environmental stewardship education to people with special needs. The shop sources ingredients from local farms, including the Allies Inc. Project Grow farm at Mercer County Community College and provides employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

“Greensleeves is an intricate piece of Allies Social mission and is dedicated to creating opportunity through community inclusion, vocational exploration and humanitarian efforts. Every piece of the puzzle matters and makes a difference in its unique way,” according to Geri Lordi, Greensleeves director.

“Most plot holders are now working with raising their beds or building raised beds. Our Duke Farm garden is planted with tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, kale, swiss chard, eggplant and herbs. We even have two Alpine strawberry plants.”

“One of our other day programs, Allies Greensleeves Somerville, we have approximately 10 to 15 individuals come out and help (on Flemington's off days) with the watering and weeding tasks. Individuals enjoy the outdoors, and feel a real purpose and a sense of being useful in the gardens. The self-esteem, and pride they get from gardening and producing their own vegetables, flowers and herbs is amazing,” said MaryAnne McMillan, HTR Allies Inc. and president of the American Horticultural Therapy Association.

The AHTA is the only U.S. organization committed to promoting and developing the practice of horticultural therapy (HT) as a unique and dynamic human service modality. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit, AHTA advocates on behalf of the professional interests of HT practitioners and strives to increase beneficial outcomes for participants, host facilities, researchers and educators. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie is the first governor to sign into law the first Senate and Assembly joint bills in the U.S. designating the third week of March beginning 2016 as Horticultural Therapy Week to increase awareness.

“We’ve started plants from seed, and have received donated plugs and plants. They were so excited the other day when they saw our first ‘Purple Beauty’ pepper. They wanted to pick it but it wasn’t quite ready. Growing their own produce is a huge bonus and exciting for them to be able to take some back to their families or group homes. At Duke Farms our mission is not only as a vocational training area but as much as it is a mission to learn, to grow and to become a member of the even bigger community of the Duke Farm Community Gardens,” McMillan said.

For information about Duke Farms Community Garden contact Melissa Almendinger at malmendinger@dukefarms.org. For Allies Greensleeves Flemington or Somerville, contact Beth Carey at bcarey@alliesnj.org. For information about the AHTA, go to www.ahta.org.



Duke Farms Community Garden plots as far as the eye can see create a community puzzle of 462 pieces (plots) and 500 active gardeners. (Photo courtesy of Duke Farms Foundation)

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