

Apple Valley's herb garden is way to assist the community

By Val Van Meter
Sunday, December 21, 2008

The Winchester Star

Winchester — On Sundays during the summer, Ann Wallinger would cook special vegetarian meals for residents at the William & Henry Evans Home for Children, using vegetables and herbs grown on the property.

She could do that because she and other members of the Apple Valley Garden Club planted those herbs and vegetables last spring.



Patrick Rodgers (left), an employee with Susquehanna Technologies, sets up a compost bin with Apple Valley volunteer Jake Welbourne.
(Photo by Val Van Meter)

“They have been just fabulous,” said Marc Jaccard, executive director of the Evans Home.

The house parents have used the garden's produce for dinners at the home, he said, and the children — who take part in a gardening project to aid the local food bank — watched their own garden grow during summer and then used the produce themselves.

“One of the core principles of the Apple Valley Garden Club's mission is to give back to the community,” Wallinger said.

The members have done that in several ways, she added, by maintaining landscaping at the Our Health campus and the courtyard of the Kurtz Building in downtown Winchester.

But their project at the Evans home is the largest and certainly the tastiest to date.

And it will be bigger still.

On a recent Saturday, garden club members and many volunteers, including a contingent of the Young Marines, were hard at work in the

“back yard” at the Evans Home.

The Shenandoah Valley Young Marines helped to tear out old plants in the temporary garden and put together compost bins and the frames for raised beds in what will be a new and extensive vegetable garden next spring.

“This is going to be so amazing for these kids,” said Molly Steadman, whose husband Michael owns Susquehanna Technologies. She and several of the firm's employees were volunteering to get the new garden started.

Already, Wallinger said, some of the youngsters were discovering the joys of fresh food. One child gleefully reported to Wallinger that she had picked fresh chives from the herb garden and eaten them on a baked potato.

The goal of the new garden will be to give the children many more choices over a long gardening season.

But it's taking a lot of work.

The temporary bed, which supplied tomatoes and cucumbers, was much too small for growing many vegetables. The new area, stretching along a perimeter fence on the south and west of the property, will give space for many more plants, producing much more fresh food.

And volunteer efforts are the heart of the project Wallinger said.

“We only have 15 active members” in the club, she said. But many people have come forward to lend a hand.

Marilyn Steere, who helped to start the garden club, pressed her son into service when hours of cleaning weeds and undergrowth along the fence gave small results.

Michael Steere brought a backhoe to move the job along.

“Some of us are getting old and feeble,” Marilyn Steere explained with a smile.

The Shenandoah Valley Young Marines dug and wheel-barrowed with gusto to clear out the temporary garden and some stray tree seedlings and weeds, and then threw themselves into screwing compost bins together and building the frames for the raised beds.

Open to boys and girls ages 8 to 18, the group takes part in many activities and performs community service projects.

Other gifts also helped to make the project a reality, Wallinger said.

A grant from the Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs for youth gardening projects was used for supplies to build the garden.

Susquehanna Technologies gave \$500 for materials, she added, and 84 Lumber donated the cedar boards needed for the raised beds.

On a cool October day, with the new garden area surrounded by a new rabbit fence, the volunteers helped to put the framework together, place the frames, and fill them with a special growing medium.

The four-foot-wide beds will hold a variety of vegetables. The slender two-foot-wide boxes will be planted with tomatoes trained on poles.

The two compost bins were assembled and placed in a corner of the garden on black plastic.

“It cuts down on household trash and fertilizer,” Wallinger said.

At her house, between recycling and composting, “we have almost no trash.”

Part of the project will be to teach the residents of the Evans Home about gardening.

“They are going to learn a lot,” Steadman predicted.

“We would like to have the children here understand where food comes from,” said member Jake Welbourne, “and the effort it takes to get a pound of food on your table, the water it takes to nurture it, and the effort it takes to pick it.”

“We hope to encourage them to take to this life [of gardening],” said Marilyn Steere. “They’ll be learning to work with nature, not against it. With the way the economy is going, we may all need a big garden.”

The extra space and the raised beds should allow Wallinger to expand the “Evans Garden Cookbook” which she and the youngsters at the facility have been putting together during the summer with recipes using their produce.

The herb garden is doing well, she said, and it will be expanded next year, if the weather cooperates, with a large strawberry bed as well.

And with melons and squash and beans from the new extended garden, Wallinger will have more opportunities to expand the “Evans Home Garden Cookbook” she started this year with the children.

That fits in with the home’s mission, Jaccard said, since all the students get training in the kitchen.

“The kids take one night a week to prepare dinner,” he said. They do the shopping and cook the meal.

“They can all cook for 20,” he said, but added jokingly that he wasn’t sure if they know how to microwave a solitary meal.

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