

Growing gardeners

Volunteers teach others how to bring earth to bloom.

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For Barbara and Cliff Bandstra, the lush and prolific gardens that dominate their one-acre Wall property are a four-season labor of love.

Just now, the Bandstras' summer bounty of colorful annuals joins a crowd of perennials, plus vegetables and herbs. Whimsical statuary, birdbaths and hanging decorations are given dramatic, yearlong backdrop by various evergreen trees and shrubs.

Come fall, the Bandstras are busy tending their orchid collection in their greenhouse, and autumn growers such as mums. Even in January and February, when the weather is not too harsh, these passionate gardeners are outside pruning. Inside, they're researching and planning for the spring gardening.

The Bandstras are members of the Master Gardeners, an organization of volunteers who mentor and teach aspiring gardeners.

Passionate gardeners of the future are in the making at Deep Cut Gardens, part of the Monmouth County Park System, in Middletown. This summer and fall, school children are helping tend crops and flowers in a program supervised by Karen Livingstone and Julie Soleil of the parks system. Planting and tending of the various crops and flowers that grow into the fall include kale, cabbages, broccoli, onions, carrots, soybeans and pansies.

Livingstone said the children work in the gardens and are given plants to take home and care for. On Sept. 16, they will plant fall crops such as radishes, lettuce, kohlrabi, cabbage and peas. Growing and thriving in the summer — despite visits by deer — are tomatoes, peppers and basil, which Livingstone said, the children will use to make salsa. The junior gardeners, ages 7 through 10, are joined by the junior gardening counselors, ages 13 through 16.

Soleil said by late September through October, the fall crops will arrive and the passionate gardeners can enjoy their labors.

At her happily tended backyard garden in Sea Girt, Judith Jones Ambrosini said the seesaw summer of 2006 weather of high, humid temperatures alternating with gushes of short-lived rain have played havoc with her herb growing.

But the fall is another story.

"I garden right up until frost. By the end of August, I will have beautiful sedum, black-eyed Susans, figs, lilies and roses. I've also put in some topiaries that are really quite nice"

Jones Ambrosini said that her hibiscus and lavender plants are still vibrant and beautiful and needing attention in the fall.

"Fall gardening is the time to clean the garden up, and I'm planting things early for next year because I'm going away. I'll be planting chrysanthemums, cabbages and whatever I can find that is new and interesting at Bear Creek (Herbary, Howell)," Jones Ambrosini said.

Another gardening task for year-round gardeners is to prune, as the Bandstras will do, and as Jones Ambrosini says she will do to her butterfly bush.

"It can grow as much as 15 feet high. I cut it right down to the ground; it's very painful to do but sure enough, it comes back as big as before!"

Diane Zahorsky, home horticulturist for Rutgers University Cooperative Extension Service of Monmouth County, organizes and operates the Master Gardeners program of Monmouth County. Zahorsky says the program admits 30 new members yearly. Linda Schoch, horticulture consultant, is Zahorsky's counterpart for the Ocean County gardening program. The gardening helpline number for Ocean County is (732) 349-1245; it's answered from 9 a.m. to noon Mondays through Fridays.

Zahorsky said Master Gardeners typically are residents "that have a passion for gardening and a desire to share their knowledge with the general public."

The program covers all aspects of gardening and pest management, with an aim at reducing pesticide use, and "really knowing and understanding the problems of plants so you can understand how you can treat them," Zahorsky said.

Master Gardeners receive training and are active in working with charities and schools.

"We're looking for those who are experienced volunteers. There is a fee of \$200 for the first year, which covers speakers fees, materials and classes," Zahorsky said.

The Master Gardeners Monmouth County program helpline, answered by volunteers such as the Bandstras, for gardening questions and problems is (732) 303-7614; it's answered 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays through Fridays.

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