

MCC garden still going strong

By Kyle Kernan
MR - posted Fri., Feb. 24, 2012

Betty Lou Sandy, who supervises the garden for the Sustainability Committee and Jeremiah Sawma, co-chair of the Sustainability Committee at the Manchester Community College Garden. Photo by Kyle Kernan.



Manchester Community College is making strides in sustainability. One of the chief components of their initiatives is their community garden that has grown to be something special over the years.

MCC faculty member Patrick Sullivan worked on sustainability and committee gardens 15 years ago for MCC's first garden, which was where the parking lot is now, in front of Tower B.

The garden was erected four and one-half years ago when a student asked instructor Betty Lou Sandy if they could have a garden to do research. The whole thing started with that idea, started out small and got bigger, said Sandy.

Jeremiah Sawma, Sandy and volunteers from the community originally worked hard to clear out concrete and other rock fragments to make way for where the garden is now, which is a field on the outskirts of the MCC campus. Lou is a gardening expert who has worked on gardens and sustainability projects at the YMCA in Wilton. She loves gardening, being outside and being able to teach others.

Sandy teaches 15 classes a year in the garden and helps many members of the student body and greater community with her gardening expertise.

There are 100 plots in the garden and a shed that stores tools. Forty plots are currently used by community and academic members, including the Academic Dean of the college.

English classes seek poetic inspiration, science courses study chemical reactions of plants, and anthropology students bury artifacts and then dig them up to study them, said Sawma, who co-chairs the Sustainability committee, along with Pauline Lizotte.

Sandy and Sawma have made the garden accessible to handicapped folks, who can't bend down to tend to their garden, by raising it up from the ground through the construction of wooden rectangle boxes. Rocks are also put under these boxes to prevent animals from burrowing under.

Sandy has implemented a unique strategy to ward off unwelcome guests, by planting scallions and garlic on the outside perimeter of the garden. "They don't like that," Sandy said.

We had a problem with woodchucks last year, but we took care of it," added Sandy who didn't reveal her methods of dispatching the woodchucks.

Nature has unique strategies to protect itself though, according to Sandy. For example, nature uses sugar as an anti-freeze, she said.

Sandy and the Sustainability committee also put a 425-foot well in place. A generator brings the water up to two 600-gallon immense water jugs. There are wood blanks and skids under where the water is dispensed, so people don't get their feet muddy, said Sandy. "We go through that much water a day," she said.

Another innovative mark of MCC's garden is a long line of windowed-in plants that can grow year round, acting as a miniature green house. If you put your hand inside, the temperature is 20 degrees warmer.

Copious amounts of kale, asparagus, garlic and spinach can be found in the garden during the winter during this time of year. Sandy said, when you grow food naturally it's rich in flavor, it's natural, you can't get that in the store. Those foods are doused in chemicals and are grown for production, not to mention how transportation affects the overall quality of the food.

"Here we can make food like this available for those who wouldn't have it otherwise," said Sandy. Sixty-five percent of Manchester residents live in condos or in apartment complexes where they can't have a garden or enjoy fresh vegetables said Sandy.

The MCC sustainability committee also puts on a farmers' market in the spring. Ten vendors usually come from surrounding farms to sell organic, fresh foods.

As plots are available, the price for plot is \$30 for the year, however it is not finalized yet, said Sawma.

"I get calls all the time from people interested to have plots," said Sandy.

Her Organic Vegetable Gardening course began Feb. 29 and runs until March 28. The fee is \$105 and you can learn the benefits of organic food, and how to identify what crops, soil and light is needed to plant the veggies and fruits you want.

If you are interested in learning more about the garden or about the courses offered throughout the year, e-mail Sandy at bettylous.gardening@snet.net.