The Ability Garden Announces Friends of the Ability Garden Enhancement Fund

The Ability Garden has officially made its home with Cooperative Extension this year by moving all its funds into an enhancement fund known as “Friends of Cooperative Extension’s Ability Garden.”

What does this change mean for the Ability Garden? Our fiscal sponsorship now falls under the Cooperative Extension Service Foundation, which is under the umbrella of the N.C. Agricultural Foundation, Inc. All future contributions and donations must be directed to “The NC Ag Foundation for the Ability Garden.” This puts your donation directly into the Enhancement Fund and right into the hands of the Ability Garden.

The NC Ag Foundation provides a strong, sustainable base of operations and is a powerful vehicle for attracting and absorbing larger individual gifts to the Ability Garden because of the durability of N.C. State University. Donors can make their gift feeling confident that it will be well stewarded and will grow as long as the university exists. Further, it will be managed with fiduciary care to ensure that gifts made to the Ability Garden are utilized as they were gifted.

Thanks to the vision and support of the Arboretum Foundation, Cooperative Extension’s Ability Garden already has a successful track record stretching back over eight years. New Hanover County, through its relationship with Cooperative Extension, has also been a substantial supporter by providing a beautiful, world-class botanical garden to house the Ability Garden classrooms. We also receive the benefit of office space, office supplies (including everything needed to produce our newsletters), and access to over 200 volunteers who have passed the Master Gardener program and need to complete their volunteer obligation. Both New Hanover County and N.C. State University support the salary of a key staff person. Now, adding to this record of support, we have the benefit of accounting, bookkeeping, and support for grant writing.

It is an exciting time to be a part of the Ability Garden. Come join us in the garden!

Dear Ability Garden Supporter:

These are exciting times for the Ability Garden Program. With the transfer of fiscal operations to the Cooperative Extension Foundation, many opportunities for establishing sustainability through grants and donors are on the horizon. We now have the strength of N.C. State University and the Agricultural Foundation behind our efforts. Our horticultural therapy program has grown tremendously over the past few years and with growth comes increased staff demand based on additional requests for service. Our internship program contributes to sustainability of horticultural therapy through on the job training that requires ongoing funding as well.

One of the most important outcomes of this new fiscal arrangement will be our visibility as a Cooperative Extension educational program. We have always known what a great program we have right here in New Hanover County and now everyone else will know too!

—Melissa Hight, Cooperative Extension Director
1997 was a year of incredible change for John and Amy Stuart. Their third child was born just eleven months before John survived a devastating accident that nearly cost him his life. Amy was initially told that her husband would not live through his injuries; then that he would never recover from the coma; and finally, that after coming out of the coma he would never speak again. John lived and speaks and is father to his children, and he is an Ability Garden volunteer.

One aspect of the Arboretum that John especially likes is the large red Dwarf Japanese Maple in the Japanese Garden. “I have been to the Japanese Garden many times,” he said, “and every time I look at it, it’s amazing. You know how old it is by how big it is – and it’s huge!”

When John was in his twenties he ran his own landscaping business with equipment that included two dump trucks and a Ford F-350. Although he eventually gave that up to sell insurance, he never lost his love for the outdoors and the natural environment.

His wife Amy said, “He always loved plants and I like that he gets his hands in the dirt” when he is at the Ability Garden. “She tells me to go,” John added.

Much as he loves the plants, John says that what he really likes about his work at the Ability Garden is, “I like the feeling of producing money for the programs.” The plants that John pots up and nurtures are sold in a variety of community settings, raising much needed funds that keep horticultural therapy programs free of charge to anyone who needs them, regardless of their ability to pay.

He also pointed out that the time he spends with his colleagues at the Ability Garden is one of the only times he socializes with people other than his family. Amy said, “I like the fact that he’s getting out with other people who have a disability, so that he doesn’t feel so unusual.”

“It’s hard to communicate – I need an interpreter,” he said, referring to his long-time supporter Jason Nye. Jason began his association with John nearly four years ago and has become adept at helping him communicate smoothly.

Jason also enjoys the social aspects of the Ability Garden, getting his hands in the dirt and watching the growth of the plants. “This lets John be more outgoing, show off his sense of humor, and practice talking,” he said.

“I work on recovery constantly,” John added. “I like to play chess, and that’s a therapy for brain injury.” He has recently begun weekly chess sessions with another man who has a brain injury.

John stays busy at home with his three sons – Jason, 22; Anthony, 16; and James, 12. Amy takes advantage of the time her husband spends at the Ability Garden to catch up on noisy housework like vacuuming. “The Ability Garden should be supported, even by people who don’t need it, because we need these places,” she said.

See you all at Art in the Arboretum

October 10—11, 2008

John has enjoyed many years of participation in Ability Garden programs. He is one of many people who have lost hours due to funding cuts and is no longer able to attend. We miss you, John!

There is a new way for volunteers to support the Ability Garden: come work at an Outreach Plant Sale! It is lots of fun because you get to meet new people, share your love of plants, and share your love of the Ability Garden! We need help during Art in the Arboretum. If you are available, give Beth Ann a call at 798-7668.
A group of school social workers and counselors held their monthly meeting at the Ability Garden on May 23, taking the opportunity to learn about horticultural therapy and how to partner with us to provide learning experiences for students with special needs.

Fourteen people from twelve different schools began their visit by observing a school’s class in progress. Phyllis led the students through a typical horticultural therapy session, working with them on completing a multi-step project. Throughout the project, students were encouraged to interact in appropriate ways, work as independently as possible, and learn about their place in the natural world.

After the school group finished, the social workers gathered for an informal lunch discussion about horticultural therapy in their schools. Sammy Dorsey, school social worker for Blair and Codington Elementary schools, gave a number of suggestions for developing a garden on-site. He has built raised beds at both of his schools, using funding provided by several local grants.

“The trick is that the school wants to know how the garden improves education,” he explained, “but the garden club wants to know how it beautifies the grounds.” He made a number of suggestions for funding sources and pointed out that support from administration is critical to the success of these programs.

Beth Ann took the group on a tour of the Arboretum, using this opportunity to give some suggestions about plant selection in a school garden.

“Make sure you don’t fill them up with plants that bloom in the summer, since no one will be there to see them,” she said. “Cooperative Extension can help you pick plants that will tolerate the conditions at your school. We want your students to be successful with their garden and feel pride in their accomplishment.”

The social workers discovered that using horticulture as a therapeutic intervention was something they could apply to a variety of situations. Some of their students are socially isolated or economically disadvantaged; these students could work in a school garden and earn the respect of their peers. Other students have severe to profound disabilities; these students work at whatever is an appropriate level for them, taking advantage of a rare opportunity to spend time outdoors.

After the class and an informal lunch discussion, Phyllis led the group through the process of making a terrarium in a bag. This project allows participants to learn about an ecosystem, how to do a multi-step project, and how to maintain plants.

As a result of their visit, 70% of the social workers who responded to a follow-up survey said they had learned something new about horticultural therapy, and 90% said they would like to start a garden at their school. Plans are underway to develop programming in response to their needs and will be available this fall.

Five young people who are participating in a summer program with the Juvenile Day Treatment Center (JDT) joined Ability Garden staff to do summer maintenance in the Hospice Memorial Butterfly Garden this August. The Butterfly Garden contains shrubs and flowers that attract butterflies due to their foliage and nectar. Families that are using Hospice’s services find the garden soothing to look at and visit. It can also be a place of solace for people who are grieving.

Claire Hetzel, horticultural therapy agent, led the group activities, beginning with deadheading old flower heads. Some of the young people had gardened already, often with a grandparent. They described growing tomatoes, corn, squash, cucumbers, and watermelon.

The JDT staff members are all new to gardening and were eager to learn from their experiences in the Hospice Butterfly Garden. For young people living in stressful situations, spending time in the fresh air (even though it was really hot!) was a pleasant respite. They worked together as a team and volunteered to take on a variety of tasks, including mulching, watering, and carrying heavy supplies back to the Ability Garden van.

Students and staff enjoy getting their hands dirty at the Hospice Memorial Butterfly Garden during a service-learning experience.
Cooperative Extension’s Ability Garden is sponsored by the NC Agricultural Foundation

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Angel Campaign Begins!

It’s hard to believe that it has been almost a year since our last Angel Campaign! Your continued generosity is a moving testament to the value you place on the services we provide here at the Ability Garden. Keep an eye on your mailboxes! Soon you will see the familiar Angel looking at you, asking that even in these difficult economic times, you help support the Ability Garden. You can make it possible for us to continue providing free programs that bring isolated or overlooked people into the garden, where they can grow and heal.

CCAHTA 20th Annual Conference

The Central Carolinas Chapter of the American Horticultural Therapy Association held its twentieth annual conference on September 14-15, 2008.

Ability Garden horticultural therapists Phyllis Meole and Claire Hetzel gave a presentation to the group titled “Incorporating Successful Nature-based Activities in an HT Program.” They explained that a nature-based activity should involve plants, plant parts or consideration of the natural world; the activity should have therapeutic value; and the materials used should be safe for the particular group of participants who will do the activity.

The activities they demonstrated included a cutting bag, lemonade-making, and planting a sunflower seed in a pot made from recycled newspaper. These activities place an emphasis on nature and the greatest possibility of enrichment from nature. Therapeutically, they can address the following treatment areas:

- Fine or gross motor skills
- Cognitive abilities, awareness
- Sensory stimulation
- Psycho-social interaction, awareness of others in the group
- Having lots of fun!

Claire Hetzel and Phyllis Meole instruct their fellow horticultural therapists in a variety of nature-based activities.