

Garden Club tour highlights the best of Somerville greenery this weekend

By Teddy Applebaum

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Somerville -

Next to the Commuter Rail tracks, where a Hostess factory once stood, there lies a vibrant garden that just happens to be a certified wildlife habitat.

The VNA Community Garden is one of 42 stops on the Somerville Garden Club's hidden garden tour that will take place on Saturday, June 21. The self-guided tour, formerly run by the Somerville Arts Council, is the first since 2000. The VNA Community Garden is located behind the VNA Assisted-Living community on Lowell Street. What is now a lush garden was once an empty lot full of rubble and brush and littered with trash



By Keith E. Jacobson/Staff Photographer

Lisa Dezmelyk a member of the Somerville Garden Club chats with Dr. Gerry MacMillan, a resident at the Visiting Nurse

“The whole site was a toxic waste site,” said Linda Cornell the president/CEO of the VNA. “We had to remove asbestos lead, oil, even a little bit of arsenic.”

In 2002, landscape architect Tim Houlihan took note of the lot's many possibilities and offered to design a handicapped accessible garden for the space.

The garden was completed in 2005 to the delight of the facility's many residents. The living community's first resident, the late Cecil “Nick” Nickerson, was particularly enthralled with the new space.

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“He decided once we built that garden that it really needed national recognition, so he took it upon himself to write to the National Wildlife Foundation,” said Cornell.

After about three months of waiting the foundation notified the VNA that their garden would be officially certified. A sign in the garden informs visitors that the space provides “food, water, cover, and places to raise young,” the requirements of a wildlife habitat.

“He was thrilled,” said Cornell. “It really is cool.”



Cornell said that the garden receives a variety of animal visitors.

“We do have wildlife; we have at least 10 to 15 varieties of birds, raccoons, groundhogs and skunks, unfortunately.” According to Cornell, raccoons have been known to steal the goldfish out of the garden’s water lily-covered pond.

“Our residents go out and count the fish every day and make sure that they are all there and all accounted for,” she said.

Current resident Gerard MacMillan said he spends time in the garden every day and considers it an urban oasis.

“I love it because it’s a virtual escape from the city environment right here in our own back yard,” said MacMillan.

The gardeners themselves nominated gardens on the tour as did neighbors, friends and passersby. Desmelyk said tracking down Somerville’s best gardens was an “investigative process.”

“Literally we walked the streets of Somerville with a pad a paper and I’m going, ‘Hey, what’s behind that fence? Let’s nominate them,’ ” said Desmelyk.

The Garden Club received more than 100 nominations that were individually reviewed and eventually whittled down to the 42 most interesting.

