

Santa Rosa youth bloom in urban oasis

It's a flourishing garden in the middle of a sea of asphalt.

A small space, dead center in the Santa Rosa City Schools District parking lot, that just a year ago was a stretch of dirt and weeds and a few sad-looking fruit trees.

Today there is a footbridge over a rock-lined drainage spillway that is gorgeous but also entirely functional. There are grapevines and trellises, a brand new equipment shed, dahlias and roses, and a smattering of flower beds and fountains.

And perhaps most beautiful, there is regular activity on Ridgeway Avenue, just east of Highway 101.

It's a sight to behold, but it lacked enough seating for the students and teachers from the school district's 18--22 Transition Program who worked to create it, to actually sit and enjoy it.

The transition program targets students with special educational needs who have matriculated out of high schools throughout the district. It works to give them tools for independent living and entering the workforce.

Well aware of the lack of seating, garden volunteers Curtis Short and Pat Seddon, who for the past year



Kylie Morris, a student in Santa Rosa City School District's 18-22 Transition Program, prunes a vine Wednesday in the program's garden. CHAD SURMICK / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



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have spearheaded the garden's development with the help of community donations, again turned to friends and supporters to help buoy the project known as CHArt Garden: Building Community Connections Through Horticulture and Art.

On Wednesday, members of the Rotary Club of Sebastopol Sunrise helped students assemble a new picnic table purchased by the club.

Then they took Short and Seddon on a shopping spree of sorts, hitting up Sebastopol Hardware to collect on a Rotary donation that was matched and then some by the store.

Bonanza. "It's the latest thing that has come along in community support," Short said, estimating the volunteer-led project has pulled in about \$20,000 in donations in about a year since work began.

Throw in skilled folks donating time and talent to things like irrigation and building arbors, and the garden and the students who spend time there have become the beneficiary of all kinds of generosity.

"Curtis told me what they were doing and it was 'Great, how can we help?'" said Dan Needham of the Rotary club. "We thought the picnic table was a very useful, durable thing."

like one gate, one entrance, one picnic table and no shade. So we are making it more like a shady spot for our lunch and we get more seating area and more picnic tables."

A shed built by volunteer Garrett Blake now holds rakes and buckets and the like.

A massive garden statue created by Patrick Amiot stands guard in the corner.

Short describes the Amiot-donated piece as a delightful surprise among other treasures in the garden.

But the real delight is seeing the students in action, keeping the space up, even in the dead of winter.

"It's pretty much thrilling to see what a beautiful space it is," Seddon said. "I'm always surprised every time I go. It is such a difference from the initial feeling of 'What a yucky place to put students.' Now it feels really cool and it's really useful to these classes." *You can reach Staff Columnist Kerry Benefield at 707-526-8671 or kerry.benefield@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @benefield.*

And it seems only right to give students who have worked hard to make the garden beautiful a place to sit and take it in.

“It was shocking to me because I didn’t know we were getting a new table,” student Peka Logoai said.

Before Wednesday, there was just one table for students, Logoai said.

It wasn’t enough. They had to take turns eating there.

“We use it to eat lunch in the garden every day,” she said.

It was Logoai and fellow student Kylie Morris who worked with Rotarians to assemble the table Wednesday.

They lined up the pieces for both the tabletop and benches and used socket wrenches to pull them into place.

Elsewhere, students worked with Short and Seddon and teacher Melanie Charter picking up pruned vines, blowing leaves and deadheading flowers.

Charter has incorporated the garden into daily activities with students.

“Now it’s just part of what we do,” she said. “It’s de-stressing, which is something you can’t get at all jobs. I think it just kind of teaches them to slow down and be present and notice things. That sounds small, but it’s important.”

Also important? Learning new job skills as well as how to take direction from a variety of adults in their lives, Charter said.

“The students need to hear directions and how to interact with other people because they do kind of tune us out sometimes,” she said. “The students really love working with Curtis and Pat, they are so nice. They embrace students wherever they are and involve them.”

For student Uziel Santiago, that means finding the right job within the garden.

“Throwing out the garbage is my favorite job,” he said. “Or cutting the leaves maybe. But it’s hard.”

Morris said the hard work is gratifying. She knows what the space looked like before they got to work with Short and Seddon.

“It’s not like before it wasn’t good, but now it’s turning perfect,” she said. “We only had



Students and teachers in Santa Rosa City School’s 18-22 Transition Program clean and prune Dec. 7 in the program’s garden on Ridgeway Avenue, just east of Highway 101, in Santa Rosa.



Pat Seddon, left, helps Lily Wilkening cut marigolds Dec. 7 in the garden of the 18-22 Transition Program that’s located in the Santa Rosa City Schools District parking lot. PHOTOS BY CHAD SURMICK / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Peka Logoai trims tree branches while working Dec. 7 in the 18-22 Transition Program’s garden. Logoai also helped build a table at the garden so students and volunteers have a place to sit back and relax.



Flowers from the 18-22 Transition Program's were made into bookmarks.

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