



Veggies and Pollinators Draw Hundreds to Rhinebeck's Fourth Annual Edible Gardens Tour

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By Jack Whitman



It's

Rudy McEntire trades seeds with friends to get the vegetables he grows, like long-handled dipper gourds (photo by Jack Whitman).

just before 9 a.m., and Rudy McEntire is quietly tending to his garden full of tomatoes, peppers, and pumpkins growing high above the ground on intricate trellises. He pulls out a club-sized bottle gourd from among hundreds of dangling vegetables.

Gesturing to the bounty of crops, McEntire notes that he trades seedlings to amplify the

offering from his garden.

McEntire was one of 10 expert gardeners who opened their properties to gardening enthusiasts and greenhorns alike on Saturday for the fourth annual Edible Gardens tour, a self-guided journey across Rhinebeck and Rhinecliff organized by [Dirty Gaia](#) to spread awareness about the effects of the climate crisis in the Hudson Valley.

“We have so much creativity on tap in each of these gardens,” said Margot Dougherty. “And each is a reflection of the gardener’s personality.”

At the move-at-your-own-pace event, for which more than 100 people registered, a steady flow of visitors witnessed sustainable sanctuaries filled with flora native to the Hudson Valley, many teeming with pollinators. Some 60 percent of native pollinators are at risk of extinction. Gardeners need to be inspired to adopt more sustainable practices, said Dirty Gaia leaders.



The Rhinebeck headquarters of Winnakee Land Trust hosts a pollinator demonstration garden (photo by Jack Whitman).

Named for the Greek word for Earth, Dirty Gaia offers educational programs to “reconcile humans’ relationship with the natural world,” say its founders. “A lot of our native pollinators are in decline,” said another of them, Sue Sie. And the reasons are various: land use, pesticide use, and lack of native foliage, she added. By planting natives instead of hybrids or exotic plants, local gardeners can help fight this decline, Sie said.

This year’s tour expanded to include not only gardens that grow food but also those that

feature pollinators critical to the maintenance of a healthy ecosystem. All gardens featured native species like Brown-eyed Susan, Milkweed, Blue False Indigo, and more.

“When you’re planting something, you have an opportunity to make a positive difference for our environment and ecosystem or not,” said Leola Specht, a sustainability steward who maintains the garden at the Winnakee Land Trust headquarters in downtown Rhinebeck. “If you plant non-natives, like most people do, you’re missing that opportunity.”



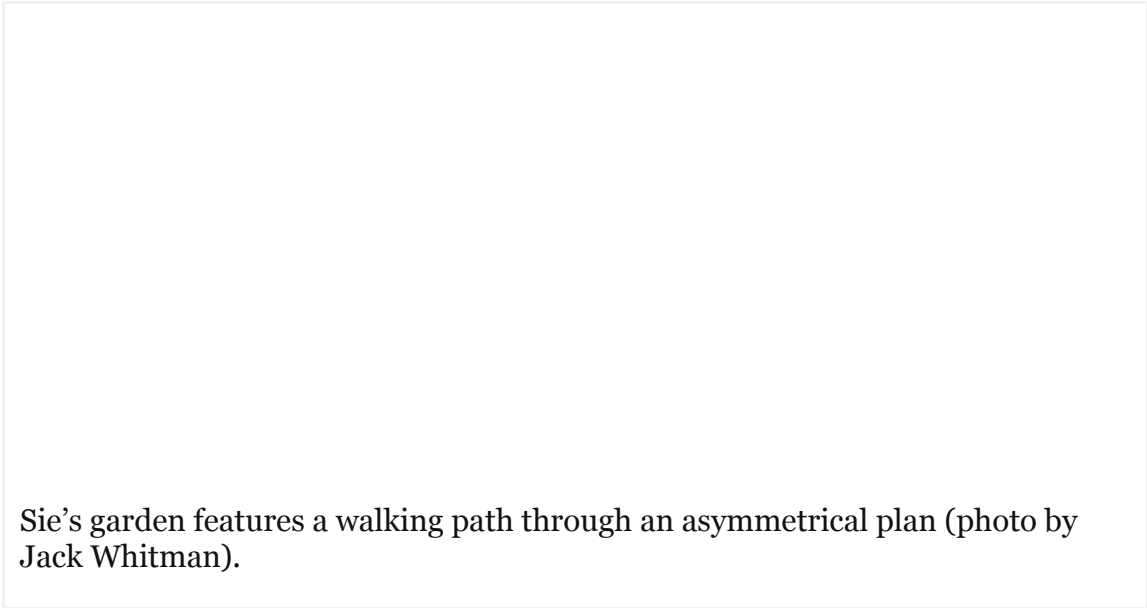
Kiera Fawlkner Jekas, left, shows off her tomatoes at Saturday’s edible gardens tour (photo by Lila McGuckin).

The front garden at Winnakee is a collage of natives including Mountain mint, Philadelphia fleabane, and New York ironweed. During the tour, Specht escorted visitors around the garden, which encircles the perimeter of the headquarters.

Specht was particularly passionate about what she called “volunteer plants,” natives that naturally appear in the garden and that novice gardeners often pluck, mistaking them for weeds. To avoid this error, Specht recommends using mobile apps like Seek by iNaturalist or PictureThis to identify plants.

Edible gardens don’t simply benefit local ecosystems and feed families; they can also offer opportunities for creativity, she added. Sitting atop a set of stone steps enshrouded by greenery was Sue Sie’s labyrinthine edible garden, Woodchuck’s Paradise. A retired architect, Sie uses physical structures in garden design, among them an outdoor room with walls formed by corn stalks.

Olga Petrou, who lives in Kingston and works with Sie on her outdoor creations, says gardens need not be structured in neat, uniform rows. “Gardening is a reflection of



Sie's garden features a walking path through an asymmetrical plan (photo by Jack Whitman).

personality, so don't be afraid to experiment," she advised.

Sie's garden began as formal and symmetrical and over time grew more abstract, she said. "Instead of imposing my own design, I let the site inform my vision," she said. The result is a garden of lush beauty complemented by Sie's architectural background and a diversity of plant textures that, she says, are designed to wow both pollinators and humans.


Just down the road from Woodchuck's Paradise sits McEntire's garden, André's Domain, named after the owner's Swiss mountain dog, André. His garden is built for verticality with giant milk bottle gourds and long-handled dippers that look like Christmas ornaments dangling from the trellises.

McEntire doesn't just grow his prized gourds in eye-catching ways but he ensures that they each find a use after harvest. Scattered around his property McEntire has transformed gourds into birdhouses, sturdy planting pots, water bottles, and makeshift musical instruments.

One visitor to McEntire's garden was Patricia Graham of Tivoli and her husband, Robin. Graham belongs to a community garden in Tivoli and joined the tour to gather new tricks and ideas and to savor the creativity of her fellow gardeners. "Gardens are a lot of effort," she admitted, "but they always give back."

McEntire divulged helpful tips for keeping pests away from home gardens. For instance,

he



Butterflies are among the critters attracted to pollinator gardens (photo by Lila McGuckin).

uses clumps of dog hair, courtesy of André, to keep deer away and litters a trail of cayenne pepper around the edge of his garden to deter squirrels.

“The big lesson is there’s no one right way to garden,” says Dougherty. “It’s just fun to see how different people do it.” Accepting failure and staying optimistic amid gardening challenges are critical for the hobby, the event leaders said.

“We’d love for people to be inspired to start gardens of their own,” said Sie reflecting on her hopes for the event. “I hope that people treat it like an adventure.”

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