

Sonoma Home

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PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Pattie Dawson works in the Children's Garden at Los Guilicos on Monday in Santa Rosa.

From out of the ashes

A CHILDREN'S GARDEN REGROWS

By **MEG MCCONAHEY**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

When a crew of Sonoma County Master Gardeners first surveyed what was once a garden for foster kids from the nearby Valley of the Moon Children's Center, it was little more than "a burned wasteland," they said.

The Glass Fire of 2020 had ripped through the county complex at Los Guilicos, charring large swaths of the 241-acre property beneath Hood Mountain Regional Park. Among the casualties was the garden where children and teenagers, dealing with trauma in their young lives, were able to get outside and engage with nature.

"All we could see was the possibility of it," said Master Gardener Pat Decker, who has coled an effort to heal the garden that had been a healing space for so many kids.

So when Sonoma County Supervisor Susan Gorin approached the group about reviving the garden, they were on board. The gardeners got to work applying their own vision to make the 360-square-foot space an outdoor classroom with everything from raised beds of vegetables and herbs to compost boxes and worm bins and even "a bug hotel" to accommodate beneficial insects.



A gulf fritillary butterfly takes nectar from marigolds in the Children's Garden at Los Guilicos.

After fire charred the plots at Los Guilicos, Master Gardeners created a living classroom in the healed space

Now Mother Nature's mysteries and magic are at work for kids to see and experience. Kids and adults alike are invited to come by Oct. 14 to celebrate the space with a Children's Garden Jamboree.

The event will be the debut for the garden that showcases many of the horticultural practices the master gardeners teach in the community, as volunteers under the aegis of the University of California Cooperative Extension.

In addition to exploring the garden, decked out for fall with hanging gourds and pumpkins on the vine, kids can make several craft projects to take home, like corn-husk dolls, sun catchers, gratitude banners and paper butterflies and ladybugs. They can also learn how to create a small garden of plants and succulents in recycled containers and catch a puppet show.

Adults, too, are invited to check out the garden. They can take a guided walk to explore wildflowers and trees at 11 a.m. and a talk on irrigation systems at 1 p.m.

Transformation from ruin

About 20 master gardeners pitched in to transform the ruin into a vibrant garden hum-

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FRESH CUTTINGS

SANTA ROSA

Native plant blowout sale

The Milo Baker chapter of the California Native Plant Society holds its annual plant sale Saturday, Oct. 14, with lots of options for making your landscape more resilient.

The group will have more than 2,000 plants for sale, 400 more than last year, to meet the demand of gardeners who want to use less water. Some of the plants for

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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

How to help your garden through the vagaries of fall

Question: It's October and I'm still harvesting my summer vegetables, yet it's obvious that garden plants are losing vigor. The days are noticeably shorter. What are the garden tasks I need to consider now?

Answer: Soon you'll need to harvest the last of the summer vegetables and tender herbs, before the first frost. If you want to extend the season for warm-weather crops such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplants by a week or so, you could install row covers and cold frames for frost protection.

As veggies fade, cut plants off just below soil level to preserve the soil microbiology on the roots. If you're immediately replanting the bed and encounter the existing subsurface root, leave it in place and position each new plant start to the



Row covers or cold frames provide frost protection and can extend the growing season for warm-weather plants.

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GARDEN

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ming with life and brimming with fall bounty.

One of the first tasks was to assess the trees still standing on the site, which is just across the road from Los Guilicos Village, a community of tiny homes for people without shelter.

Image Tree Service of Healdsburg did the work pro bono, ultimately removing 12 dead, dying or dangerous trees, including a giant pine, and cutting them into wood chips that now stand in large piles to incorporate in and around the garden.

Very little survived the fire, which did some \$8 million in damage to land and structures at Los Guilicos. But volunteers found one stubborn survivor, a rosemary bush, which now has an honored spot in one of several raised beds made of stone blocks. The blocks were cleaned and the garden beds replenished with new soil; now they are curated in a fun and explanatory way for kids.

Parents can pick up ideas to interest their kids in growing plants and working outside at home, too. The garden is divided into five “rooms,” each with something to teach, with beds and troughs devoted to different concepts.

There is the Three Sisters area, with the complementary crops of corn, beans and squash. The Pizza and Salsa, Herbs and Edibles area is filled with ingredients — such as tomatoes, basil and peppers — for some of kids’ favorite foods. The Five Senses section has plants that can be touched (lamb’s ear), smelled (mint) and tasted.

There are also Troughs for All Seasons, now filled with ripe pumpkins. The pumpkins are growing on flat stones to prevent rot, one of many ideas gardeners can pick up while exploring the garden.

Volunteers started planning the garden last November. After securing an agreement with the county, they set to work at the beginning of March, first installing an irrigation system thanks to \$20,000 in support from Wyatt Irrigation Supply in Ukiah and Hunter Industries in San Marcos.

Then they trucked in 40 cubic yards of soil and planted 650 plants, including vegetable starts grown from seeds in their own windowsills and native plants dug up from their own backyards.

There are not only food crops in the new garden, but California natives along the edges, the start of a hedgerow that will provide habitat and food for wildlife. The gardeners are calling this section the



Elli Samuel, left, and Sue Lovelace repair a trellis Monday in the Children’s Garden at Los Guilicos in Santa Rosa.



A caterpillar makes its way through parsley at the Children’s Garden at Los Guilicos in Santa Rosa on Monday.

4 Bs — a wall of plants attractive to bees, birds, butterflies and bugs. It is rich and diverse with plants carefully chosen so there is nectar and food throughout the year.

“We have manzanita for winter, and for spring, lots of salvias. Ceanothus for spring and fall, coffeeberry for fall berries and blooms in spring. There is a lot for caterpillars as well. We have milkweed” for monarch butterflies, said Pattie Dawson, part of the volunteer team.

“Crews were here every Monday and Wednesday clearing out weeds, mulching, preparing the beds and the pathways,” said Clio Tarazi, a retired urban planner and former president of the Master Gardeners board. The volunteers hope to eventually make the pathways even more accessible to people in wheelchairs, she added.

A ramada or arbor covered with sailcloth, designed and built by the Sunshine Rotary of Santa Rosa, offers a big shaded

CHILDREN’S GARDEN JAMBOREE

What: A celebration of the restoration of the children’s garden at Los Guilicos, with craft activities and demonstrations for kids, a tree and wildflower walk at 11 a.m. for adults and a talk on irrigation systems at 1 p.m. for adults

When: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 14

Where: 1 Los Guilicos Road, Santa Rosa (off Pythian Road)

Cost: Free; register at sonomamg.ucanr.edu

classroom and gathering spot.

“It’s like fairy dust got sprinkled on it,” Decker said of the garden. “The number of people who came out and the volunteers and the donations have been extraordinary.”

Healthy food for kids

The garden is already producing 5 to 20 pounds a week of food that is incor-



Mark Souldard, left, Christopher Downing and Anne McInerney spread bark at the Children’s Garden at Los Guilicos in Santa Rosa on Monday.

porated into meals for the 24 kids living at the Valley of the Moon Children’s Home.

The garden is a welcoming spot for the young residents.

“It’s a new experience for some that is always exciting and interesting. The younger kids really enjoy that, and it’s just nice to be outdoors,” said Julie Hillborn, a program planning evaluation analyst for the Valley of the Moon Children’s Center, of which the Children’s Home is part.

“We have several play yards and a grassy area, but this is a place where kids can see specific things grown and help tend them. Experiential learning has a lot of benefits for anyone, really,” she said. “It’s all a positive experience.”

Hillborn said that after the Glass Fire, the garden was missed but the center just didn’t have the resources or volunteers

needed to bring it back to life, particularly during the pandemic.

“It is wonderful walking past it and seeing all the flowers. It’s a happy thing, and it really brings together everyone in the community. It was a sad and devastated place and the Master Gardeners were able to make it a place where we could return again.”

The Master Gardeners hope to create more programs for children, both inside and outside the Children’s Home, and to use the garden to showcase the many techniques they want to share with the Sonoma County gardeners. Their aim is help home gardeners grow plants more sustainably, use less water, avoid toxic pest control and pay attention to the needs of wildlife.

For instance, the garden has a section devoted to ollas, an ancient form of ir-

rigation that uses clay pots to cut down on water use.

Outside the fenced-in space is an additional three-quarters of an acre that holds possibilities for more features in the future.

“Our dream is — if we get the whole area — to do a larger plan,” Tarazi said. The group hopes to eventually expand the site into a larger demonstration area to serve the whole county.

By necessity, gardening must change to adapt to drought, wildfires, climate change and habitat preservation and restoration, the Master Gardeners believe.

“We’re integrating all of these things we teach into one place so people can see,” Tarazi said. “It makes more sense than if you just hear a lecture or read it on a web page.”

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