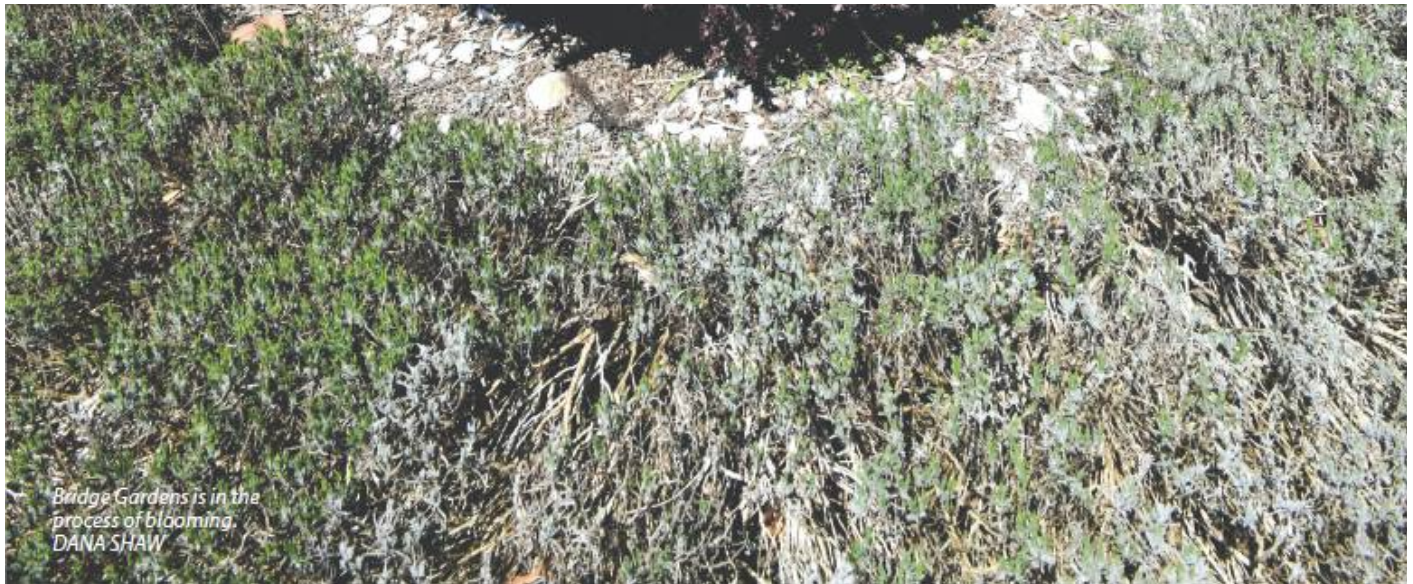


Another World

Bridge Gardens offers a zen-like retreat from the hustle and bustle of the season

BY CAILIN RILEY





Bridge Gardens is in the process of blooming. DANA SHAW

It's one of the hidden gems of the East End, and it's open — for free — for anyone to peruse, seven days a week.

Bridge Gardens is a gorgeous, peaceful, zen-inducing local paradise, accessed by an entrance at the southern end of Mitchell Lane. Stepping onto the five-acre public and demonstration garden feels like stepping into another world — the honking horns of impatient motorists, loud music from passing cars, and all the other hustle and bustle of everyday life, which reaches its peak during the summer season, fades away, replaced by the gentle trilling of wind chimes, birdsong, and soft breezes filtering through the trees, shrubbery and flowers.

The gardens have a wide variety of perennial and annual plants and flowers, hedgerows, a community vegetable garden, rose and herb gardens, and are operated by the nonprofit Peconic Land Trust. The former owners of the gardens — James Kilpatric and Harry Neyens — donated the gardens to the Trust in 2008, at which time the trust renovated and expanded the gar-

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dens, widening the scope of what the five-acre property would mean to the community at large.

The land that Bridge Gardens sits on was owned by several different people and families over the years, and in keeping with the Bridgehampton tradition, was used as a potato farm, along with neighboring land, for many generations. Potatoes were still grown there as recently as the 1970s, until 1978, when Helen Bishop Hamlin sold the section of the farm that became Bridge Gardens to Martin Cohen, Vivian Shapiro and Jeffrey Hogrefe, who converted the potato barn on the property into a residence in the 1980s. The converted barn was sold 10 years later to John and Barbara Mercier, and Kilpatric and Neyens bought the property from the Mercier family in 1990, with the vision of building a beautiful garden. They ultimately tore the barn down and started over again, on the existing footprint. It still stands today and is utilized for the purposes of the Gardens. It is also home to garden director Rick Bogusch.

When Kilpatric and Neyens owned the gardens, they had a more narrow focus on aesthetic value. While Peconic Land Trust has tried to maintain some of the history and original features of the garden, the focus has



Garden director Rick Bogusch. DANA SHAW

certainly shifted.

“Originally, it was more of a formal garden and certainly didn’t have a native garden or a low-impact, sustainable approach,” said Kathy Kennedy, senior manager of outreach and marketing for Peconic Land Trust. “It was more of a personal garden. But over the years it’s transitioned to reflect more of the mission of the Trust.”

Under the guidance of Bogusch, there has been an emphasis on native plants, and the creation of an expansive vegetable garden, with 24 community garden plots. The gardens also host a wide variety of events and programming throughout the year but particularly during the warming months, everything from art classes to curated sculpture exhibits and educational gardening classes.

“Our programming has evolved to reflect a focus on low impact, sustainable

landscape practices,” Kennedy said. “We really highlight organic practices in terms of row care, lawn care, and our herb garden.”

Bridge Gardens also donates much of its bounty to the Sag Harbor Food Pantry. In recent months, the Gardens have been at the beginning stages of hosting and facilitating an exciting collaboration that brings children from the Bridgehampton Childcare Center to the Gardens, for instruction and education on how to care for a vegetable garden. Those students will then be paired with elder (senior) members of the Bridgehampton community, and they will take what they’ve learned to the seniors’ homes, and spend time each week helping them grow and tend to small vegetable plots at their homes.

It’s an inter-generational program that not only brings new, young faces to the Gardens but helps forge connections across age ranges in the community.

Bogusch has been teaching that group — dubbed “the Dream Teens” — starting with helping them grow potted tomato plants which they will bring home and care for until it is time to plant them outdoors.

The Gardens also regularly host young visitors from children’s and summer camp programs at the Children’s Museum for the East End and Shine.



Bridge Gardens in Bridgehampton. DANA SHAW PHOTOS

For visitors with an interest in both art and nature looking for a calm, reflective experience, Bridge Gardens is a great place to visit particularly because it is still hosting Uncommon Ground IV, the sculpture garden exhibit curated by Cheryl Sokolow of C Fine Art. Roughly 20 large and impressive sculptures, created by some of the leading sculptors both locally and from across the country, have been on display in the gardens for several months, and will remain on display through September. When sculptures sell, they are typically replaced in the gardens with a new sculpture. Art enthusiasts who want to learn more about the sculptures can sign up for a curator's walk with Sokolow, scheduled for June 25.

"It gives people an opportunity to see large-scaled art in a beautiful setting," Kennedy said.

The gardens are also host to plenty of other enriching activities and demonstrations. One of the community gardeners, Justin Ruaysamran, will host a garden-to-table fermentation workshop, which he did last summer as well, getting into the art of creating foods like kimchi.

The gardens also host other programs in collaboration with different groups. A "From Lawn to Meadow" workshop — which was

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set for the end of May and teaches people how to transition a traditional green lawn area to a more sustainable meadowscape — sold out quickly. The Gardens will also host a dahlia care class in collaboration with Summerhill Landscapes on June 11. Starting on June 20, Barbara Thomas will host adult watercolor painting classes outdoors on Mondays through August 1.

The Gardens also host several music nights in the summer, when various local musicians perform live in the gardens, and members of the public are welcome to come and bring a picnic lunch (even some wine if they want) and stretch out and enjoy the summer air and music.

The Gardens do not host weddings or private events, but small groups can book garden tours led by Bogusch.

“It’s a lovely way to experience the gardens, and learn more about what’s growing there,” Kennedy said.

There is no one better to learn about the gardens from than Bogusch, who is the steward of the five-acre gem. He has an assistant who takes the lead on a lot of the major landscaping, while Bogusch takes a closer focus on the herb and vegetable gardens, rose gardens, and borders.

“I take care of them, figure out what it will look like, how the light changes over time,” he said. Bogusch is also responsible for growing, from seed, a lot of the plants that end up in the herb and vegetable gardens.

“Everything we grow in there we grow from seed,” he said.

He reflected on the changes that the gardens have undergone in the 14 years since they were taken over by Peconic Land Trust.

“When I got here, there were more straight lines, and now there are more curves, large beds, and sweeping plantings,” he said. “It’s less formal than it was, and now a major focus for Bridge Gardens is growing food. Our focus is on edible landscaping, with raspberries and other small

fruits. That’s our new focus and it’s appropriate for a public garden owned by Peconic Land Trust, whose





One of the amphibious residents at Bridge Gardens. DANA SHAW

mission is to preserve farmland and grow food. It was a change, but we felt it was a good one.”

Even with that new mission, Bogusch said there has been an emphasis on trying to maintain a nod to the history of the gardens and their original owners.

“We still have the rose gardens, the herb garden, those are our major features,” he said. “A lot of the basic structure that was created by Jim and Harry is still here, at least in the background.”

Another change was a focus on native plants and how to garden with native plants. And of course education is a main component in almost everything that goes on at the Gardens.

“Our mission is to be a demonstration garden, an outdoor classroom and a community resource,” Bogusch said. “Education was pretty important to Jim and Harry, and we’ve carried that tradition on. We’re not just a pretty face; we teach people how to garden without chemicals and grow their own food. Education is really key to what we do.”

Bogusch said he considers himself lucky to be one of the primary drivers of that mission, and to do that job while living within the gardens themselves.

“I work outside every day, and it’s really something to get to know a garden landscape or property like this over a number of years, to know the rhythms and seasonal changes,” he said. “When I’m out working in the herb garden and looking up at the big oak trees in the woods, I’m always amazed and awestruck by them, no matter the season. There’s something very peaceful about Bridge Gardens and how the light changes during the day. I always think about how I get to enjoy some of the most beautiful times, after the gates are closed, and I sort of feel guilty about that. That’s when the light comes in at that low angle that gives everything that buttery glow we’re so famous for out here.”

In keeping with that sense of gratitude, Bogusch said it’s important to give credit to the Peconic Land Trust, for doing the work of supporting the gardens, so the public can experience the peace and beauty they provide.

“Some people come here to look at the plants and learn, but a lot come just to sit at a picnic table and enjoy the light,” Bogusch said.

The gardens are open seven days a week, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., free of charge, but there is also a membership program. Membership plans start at \$75 annually for families, and members receive invites to members-only music nights, along with other perks.

For more information, visit peconiclandtrust.org/our-work/projects/bridge-gardens.