

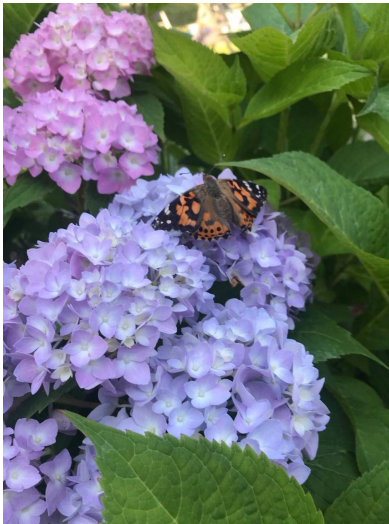
A Treat for the Five Senses in the Heart of the Village

by Bruce Brackett



When village parks need a friend, they don't have to look further than the Conservancy for Ridgewood Public Lands.

This citizens group was founded in 2012 with the mission To Provide Funding and Support to Restore and Enhance Ridgewood Park Lands. And they've been delivering on that mission with action ever since.



The Conservancy's first project was the planting of a dozen dogwood trees, flowering shrubs, perennials and spring bulbs on both sides of the Train Station staircase along North Broad Street. The Memorial Allée tribute to 9/11 victims was planted with daffodils and daylilies. Twinney Pond Park, a kettle pond conservation area for local flora and fauna, was planted with a butterfly meadow. Along the way the Conservancy set and met the goal of planting one daffodil bulb for each of Ridgewood's approximately 25,000 residents.

Six years ago Conservancy members came up with the idea of sponsoring an annual Daffodil Festival to raise public awareness of the organization's work and to provide the community with an educational and fun day in the park, particularly for young families. For four years now, the Conservancy has co-sponsored the Daffodil Festival with the Ridgewood Environmental Advisory Committee as part of Ridgewood's Earth Day Celebration.

Education is the focus of the Conservancy's newest and most ambitious project, the Children's Sensory and Butterfly Garden (CSBG) dedicated in June of last year and still a work in progress. This is a teaching garden created behind the historic Lester Stable building on Maple Avenue, on a gentle slope leading down to the Ho Ho Kus Brook.

At first glance the garden looks like a carefully landscaped mini-park in itself. The centerpiece is a handsome wooden pergola made by Amish carpenters in Pennsylvania who delivered and installed it in the Garden. You can stand under the pergola's open canopy roof and enjoy the flowering vines that cover it in spring and summer.

Winding paths lead through beds of plants and flowers chosen to attract the butterflies and bees whose pollination services are so crucial to making any garden grow. The global population of these pollinators has been alarmingly reduced by climate conditions, but the CSBG is already attracting them. There have been many sightings of the brilliantly colored Monarch butterflies that breed in the northeastern U.S. and then make their migration to winter quarters in southwestern Mexico.

In keeping with its role as a sensory garden, the CSBG offers something for all the five senses. Its visual appeal is obvious. Blossoming plants tease the sense of smell. Then there's the sound of water flowing through the three-tiered fountain that visitors of all ages are encouraged to stick their hands in and feel the cool water.

The Garden's organized educational activities include holding programs for Scout Troops, who have helped with garden plantings, and the ever-popular Story Walk. For this project, pages of a nature-oriented children's book are posted at intervals along the paths, which kids follow while absorbing the senses of their surroundings.

There's also an outdoor education area with sturdy metal tables and benches to accommodate a classroom's worth of kids. Early evidence is that the area will double nicely as a picnic spot.

While the education programs are designed for children, the Garden was created as an asset for everyone. It is completely accessible for people with disabilities, and a peaceful retreat for anyone who wants to enjoy nature by just hanging out.

The Garden has an appealing, informal look. But that informal look is the result of a landscaping design painstakingly created by the Raimondi Horticultural Group, a nationally known landscape design firm based in Ho Ho Kus and owned by Conservancy volunteer and board member Chris Raimondi. The design work and much of the installation was provided as a contribution from Chris's firm.

Volunteers and donors are essential to everything the Conservancy does. Volunteers run the education programs. They put their professional experience to work handling fundraising and bookkeeping. And they put on their gardening gloves to plant bulbs and maintain flower beds

--- whatever the group needs.

"There's a strong volunteer tradition in Ridgewood," explains Cynthia Halaby, President and co-founder, with Maribeth Lane, of the Conservancy. "That's a beauty of the village and our volunteers are what makes all this happen. And with this wonderful community spirit we look forward to continuing with our park enhancements."

Generous donors have so far made it possible for the Conservancy to contribute tens of thousands of dollars in direct funding and donated services to Ridgewood's parks. Village government is also a close working partner with the Conservancy. That partnership is personified by Nancy Bigos, Ridgewood's Director of Parks and Recreation and a Conservancy board member.

"Our parks are a natural resource that has not been fully tapped in terms of the experience they can provide for residents," Nancy said. "The Conservancy understands this and together we can enhance the quality of everyday life in the village by investing in our parks."

To learn more about the Conservancy or join it, please go to their website: www.cfrpl.org.