Water Wonder

Westdale Elementary’s water garden on pond tour

By DANNY HITTMAN

Next Sunday, for the first time that anyone can remember, a public school will be featured on one of Baton Rouge’s garden tours. That’s when Westdale Elementary’s water garden takes the spotlight as a stop on the Capital Area Pond and Water Gardening Society’s annual Tour of Ponds. No one could be happier than Margaret Mercier, a speech pathologist at Westdale who began dreaming about a garden for the school in the 1970s. “I was here 25 years ago, and I was dying to dig the yard up then, but I didn’t do it,” said Mercier, who served at many schools throughout the parish before returning to Westdale several years ago. Mercier’s dream turned to reality in 1995, when a small grant from the Academic Distinction Fund provided some seed money to start Westdale’s “Metamorphosis!” Garden. In short order, donations and volunteer labor poured in from every direction. Contractors prepared the ground and installed equipment and fencing. Experts gave free advice, and businesses pitched in with free materials. Local clubs offered money and time, and some local groups came forward with more grants.

“Literally hundreds of people have extended kindnesses large and small to Westdale — too many to name them all,” Mercier said. “Baton Rouge is a wonderful, generous place. Let the people here know that you need something, and they come through for you.” Among the donors was the Capital Area Pond and Water Gardening Society, whose members lent labor and advice to put the pond in place. “For a member of the Pond Society,” Mercier said: “It’s a wonderful organization. We

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ABOVE: Capital Area Pond and Water Gardening Society members Fred Fenn, left, and Don Johnson, right, clean the filter in Westdale Elementary’s pond. Society members helped install the pond, which will be featured on the group’s upcoming pond tour.

RIGHT: First-grade teacher Brandi Bergeron, left, coaches student Dante Hardnett in the planting of a bean seed as other students look on. The pond at Westdale’s garden will be featured in the upcoming Tour of Ponds.
Audubon Kiwanis Club member Ellis Songy, left, and Westdale Elementary speech pathologist Marci Mercier, right, survey Westdale Elementary pond, which will be featured in next week's Capital Area Pond and Water Gardening Society Tour of Ponds. Mercier supervised the school garden project, and Audubon Kiwanis was among many clubs that helped out.

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**Pond**

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A butterfly samples a zinnia at 'Metamorphone' Pond at Westdale Elementary. The garden's pond will be featured on this year's local Tour of Ponds.

"It gets its name from a tiny, white spike that looks like a lizard's tail." Mercier said.

Students also enjoy looking at the goldfish in the pond and get to know them by special markings and behavior, said Mercier.

"I wanted the children to have some connection with nature, with growing things," Mercier said. "Not that everyone lives in an apartment with a parking lot but even if you do, you can still grow plants.

Because the community has given so much to Westdale's garden, Mercier wanted to involve students in giving something back. The pond tour is part of that mission, along with the produce that grows for the Greater Baskets Rough Food Bank. "We've donated over 900 pounds of food to the Food Bank," Mercier said.

Mercier also welcomes members of the general public who wish to visit the garden during school hours. "I really want to emphasize that Westdale belongs to the community," Mercier said. "Future plans for the garden include a shaded area for class instruction and a special deck for handicapped students. "We're still in construction," Mercier said. "A garden is an evolving thing."

"Why did Mercier, a speech pathologist with no real classroom of her own, work so hard to brand a garden to Westdale? Mercier considers the question, a moment, then rubs a tear from her eye.

"I wanted to share the excitement of gardening," Mercier said. "It's something that I get so much joy from and I'm committed to this in all the children a feeling of oneness with nature..."