Tour of Ponds set

The Capital Area Pond and Water Gardening Society will hold its annual Tour of Ponds on Sunday, Sept. 26, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The rain date is Oct. 10 during the same hours. Proceeds from the tour benefit the East Baton Rouge Parish Council on Aging, a nonprofit service agency for senior citizens.

This year's tour will feature four ponds in East Baton Rouge Parish and tours in Livingston Parish.

- Melrosewood Garden, Westdale Elementary School, 2000 College Drive.
- Holy and Sheryl Lamole residence, 1331 Keystone Ave., Greewell Springs.
- Keith and Shirley Baker residence, 3522 Shakespeare.
- Allen and Linda Williams residence, 1866 Farnes Court.

Shawna Lopez and Joey Tovar residence, 2957 S. Saturna Road, Livingston.
- Clyde and Rosemary Lewis residence, 3474 Oak Place, Watson.
- James and Norma Schmidt residence, 2562 Preview Drive, Denham Springs.
- Sunny and Alice Rodriguez residence, 30257 Winchester Lane, Denham Springs.

Tour participants can visit the sites in any order they choose. Pond owners will be available to answer questions. Society membership information and applications will also be available, and plants and other merchandise will be offered for sale.

Tickets may be purchased for $10 at any site on the tour. A $3 discount will be offered to students and senior citizens with ID who buy tickets at a tour site. Tickets can also be purchased in advance at the following locations: Bayier Senior Center, 3304 Jefferson, Bayier; Collis Suitcase, 966 Gardens Lane, 247 N. Dominick and 10645 Greewell Springs Road, Church of Aging, 5760 Florida Blvd., Greewell Pet Supplies, 7777 Greewell Springs Road, Harts Oasis, 1387 Country Blvd.; Jim Stone Co., 1371 Florida Blvd.; Nancy's Hardware, 1444 Old Hammond Highway, Powell TV, 1107 Pontal Blvd., Denham Springs; White Stop Gourmet Coffee Shop, 180 N. Railroad Ave., Denham Springs; and Zachary Senior Center, 4720 Highway 19, Zachary. For more information, call (225) 935-0010, Ext. 242.

The pond at Westdale Elementary features flowing water, a bridge and an arbor. The goldfish in the pond are a hit among students.

Water Wonder

Westdale Elementary's water garden on pond tour

By DANNY HEITMAN
Associate staff writer

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 national groups came forward with more grants.

"Literally hundreds of people have extended kindness and small to Westdale — too many to name them all," Mercier said. "Baton Rouge is a wonderful, gracious 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. "I'm a member of the Pond Society," Mercier said. "It's a wonderful organization. We

See POND, Page 8H

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 annual pond tour.

RIGHT: First-grade teacher Brandi Bergeron, left, catches 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 Margaret Mercier, right, survey Westdale’s voice Lab’s pond. The pond will be featured in next weekend’s Capital Area Pond and Water Gardening Society Tour of Ponds. Mercier spoke at the school’s garden project, and Audubon Kiwanis was among many clubs that helped out.

Pond

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

Have a pond tour each year to raise awareness of ponds and to educate the public, said the East Hampton Town Route Planning Council on Aging. We try to encourage water gardeners, as it’s a necessary part of the habitat.

In a newspaper interview, Audubon Kiwanis Club president Bill Songy stopped by to check on the garden’s progress. “Kiwanis has been involved with this school for over 10 years,” said Songy, whose club has given money and manpower to start and maintain the garden.

“Kiwanians were routinely on hand as Westdale’s grassy courtyard slowly gave way to the expansive vegetable, flower and apple garden we see today,” Songy recalled. “One of the first things we did was install water lines and drainage lines.”

“The contractor came in and levelled the sod off. Then it started to rain, and it seemed like it rained every day for a week,” Mercier added, laughing.

Mercier sees the garden’s central location as a part of its appeal. “I knew I wanted a garden here,” Mercier recalled. “In many cases, a school garden is in the back 40 — in the corner, so that you have to lose your religion to get there back.”

Over the years, the garden has acquired an equalized central role in Westdale’s curriculum. With its ready-made examples of proportion and volume, the garden gives math students ample opportunities for practical application, Mercier said. Science classes have a living laboratory, and English students also look to the garden for inspiration, she added.

The children are drawn to the garden, “It’s a wonderful thing,” said Mercier. “The children read out here. They write stories about the garden. Some of the students have corresponded with other gardeners here. I’ve made some farmers out of some couch potatoes.”

Mercier said that when students enter the garden, they gravitate toward the pond, which features flowing water, a bridge and an arbor graced by flowering vines. Vegetation includes banana plants, clematis and labled toil plans.

A butterfly samples a zinnia at ‘Mimorrhizia’ Garden 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, blue spike that looks like a lizard’s tail,” Mercier said. Students also enjoy looking at the goldfish in the pond and getting to know their tails’ special markings and behavior, said Mercier.

“Students have 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 there for the Greater Bari Rouge 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 want 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 bring a garden to Westdale?

Mercier considers the question a moment, then pupils a tear from her eye.

“I wanted to share the excitement of gardening,” Mercier said. “It’s something that I get so excited about. I’m committed to this in children a feeling of ownership with nature and with the world.”