



## The Foundation Connection

A monthly e-newsletter from the Master Gardener Foundation of King County

### Ronald McDonald House Outreach Garden: *A Place of Peace*

... by Master Gardener Marty Byrne



*Master Gardeners Jim Little and Susan Eby with Ronald McDonald.*

Master Gardener Susan Eby describes the Outreach Gardens at Ronald McDonald House (RMH) this way: “Our purpose is to create an environment that is conducive to relaxation, a pleasant external environment for the families who are away from home with children being treated for very severe illnesses at Seattle Children’s Hospital.” The “House” is actually two locations, the original built in 1983 and a newer building which opened in 2005.

Emeritus Master Gardener Ralene Wells, who was also on the board of RMH, realized that the Master Gardeners (MGs) could make a significant contribution with their time and expertise because there was no money for maintenance. The gardens at the older house had become overgrown so MGs renovated those established areas. The MGs created individual focus gardens starting in 2005 after the new housing was completed. These are Outreach Gardens, not a Demonstration Garden. The Gardens are meant for the House’s residents and most are not open to the public. Part of the mission is education: demonstrating sustainable landscape practices in several ways and providing signage that invites residents to stop and enjoy the plants and ask questions.

Now there are two vegetable gardens, a shade garden, a garden featuring drought-tolerant plants, a patio garden and a sun garden that provides brilliant color and attracts pollinators.

The produce from the vegetable gardens goes to the House kitchen for the use of the residents.

“We’ve tried just about everything.” says Susan.

“We’ve pretty much narrowed it down to growing the ones people like: lettuce, carrots, beets, peas, lots of tomatoes, lots of beans, potatoes, zucchini, squash, cucumbers, peppers, raspberries and blueberries. We grow the peppers in big galvanized troughs. We do crop rotation, pretty close to a three-year plan. We’re doing a pumpkin patch. Last year, they were all excited because the vines took off and there were flowers but we didn’t get very many pumpkins. This year it looks like it’s going to be better.”



*Master Gardeners Jim Little, Susan Eby and Jean Jones prepare a new garden bed.*

The Gardens also feature ornamentals in Ronald McDonald’s colors, red and yellow.

“Traditionally every spring we plant lots of red geraniums in every conceivable spot. The pop of red has become a spring tradition. Two years ago we started planting red and yellow tulips in

the fall.” The sun garden attracts pollinating insects with peonies, sunflowers, asters, dahlias, coreopsis. Sedums flourish in the drought-tolerant garden and Solomon’s seal, sword ferns, lady’s mantle and sarcococca in the shade garden. Susan also notes, “We have one very large shallow stone bowl that we plant full of impatiens every year and it just overflows with color.”



*Master Gardener Susie Thorness hard at work.*

Susan and her co-coordinator Susie Thorness lead a small team of MGs who come to work in the Gardens on Tuesdays. They invite residents to help if they wish. Resident families are focused on their child’s medical treatment but for some, the Gardens are therapeutic. Susan recalls “We had a family who had to leave their farm in Montana to come here for several months and they came out and worked with us in the vegetable beds because it was restorative for them.” The children who stay at the House (siblings of the sick children) love to come and pick the raspberries and blueberries and cherry tomatoes. “We get a lot of positive feedback from residents and staff,” Susan notes.

This Master Gardener team also oversees several work parties each year made up of volunteers from RMH’s large volunteer database. There is always a large group in September with the annual United Way Day of Caring. The MGs find that many of these volunteers are not used to gardening. The MGs also work closely with the facilities manager and the volunteer coordinator and “maintain everything that is not turf” at both locations.

Susie has worked at this Garden since its inception and Susan joined the following year. Susan says, “The reason I’ve been here for ten years is because the staff is so appreciative of what we do and the residents are so appreciative. I really feel I’m representing the Master Gardener Program. I’m very proud to wear my badge and talk to people about what we do. We all feel that it’s a very special place to be doing Master Gardening. The connection we have with the staff and residents there and the gardening itself, it kind of makes things come full circle.”

*The Gardens at Ronald McDonald House are located at 5000 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE in Seattle. Locate the garden using the [Map to King County Clinics and Gardens](#). Master Gardeners work on Tuesdays from 10 am until noon. Please contact [Susan Eby](#) or [Susie Thorness](#), co-coordinators, for information.*