



Scott Brinton/Herald Life

Semper fi

The 1st Marine Corps. District, based in Garden City, spent a hot summer afternoon last week training at the Norman Levy Park and Preserve in Merrick.

Merokeans are master gardeners at East Meadow farm stand

By **STEPHANY REYES**

sreyes@liherald.com

Two ducks and three hens weaved in and out of vegetable gardens, rows of herbs and fields of flowers in East Meadow's 2½-acre Horticulture Center and Demonstration Gardens on Merrick Avenue.

"We call the chickens the ladies," said Jennifer R. Cappello-Ruggiero, lead horticulturist

and educator at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County's East Meadow Farm. The farm, which is part of the statewide program, aims to educate the community about ecological ways to maintain vegetation and agriculture.

East Meadow's farm is marking its fifth year, and Cappello-Ruggiero, of Baldwin, said that horticulture is becoming more popular in the community, and

beyond. To kick off the summer season, the farm opened its annual farm stand on July 14. Boxes of locally, and organically, grown plants and vegetables, from radishes to garlic to carrots, will be on sale every Friday from 3 to 6 p.m., and Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon, until Oct. 13.

"We don't use any pesticides or harmful chemicals," said lead gardener Charlie Kemnitzer,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3



Merokeans are master gardeners at East Meadow farm stand

CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

who heads the facility's vegetable committee. "Everything here is as organic as it can be."

Kemnitzer, of Merrick, who planted several plots of vegetables, flowers and herbs himself, said that the fastest-growing vegetables on the farm are tomatoes. He experiments with several methods of growing tomatoes each year, using only string, wooden posts and wire. He also harvests squash, string beans, carrots, peppers and cucumbers.

In the Children's Education Garden, 60 community garden plots boast an array of vegetation. Any Nassau County resident can rent a plot, plant a garden and use any educational tool the farm has to offer.

"These gardens are for people who live in apartment complexes or have limited access to soil in their homes," Kemnitzer explained. "People really enjoy coming out here to garden, because they see how our professional volunteer gardeners plant flowers and vegetables, and they sort of mimic what they do. And without knowing it, they learn the basics of gardening, which they then can pass on to friends or family."

Matt Blackstone, of East Meadow, said he had waited a year to rent a plot on the farm. This year he finally had the chance to get his hands dirty and plant vegetables with his 3-year-old. "I was really excited when we finally were taken off the wait list," he said. "So far, we've



Stephany Reyes/Herald

MASTER GARDENERS Karen Rose, Robbie Gluck, far left, and Dawn Avento, center, helped Matt Blackstone, of East Meadow, far right, choose the ripest vegetables at East Meadow's Horticulture Center and Demonstration Gardens' first farm stand of the season.

grown huge zucchinis. We're really excited to see what else pops up throughout the summer."

As he sifted through the farm stand's selection of carrots, Blackstone chatted with volunteers Karen Rose and Robbi Gluck, both of Merrick. The pair enrolled in the farm's Master Gardeners course, held twice a yearly, in which participants become skilled horticulturists.

"The class was truly amazing," Gluck said. "It's a hands-on learning experience. We learned about sustainability and gardening, but the most important lesson was learning how a garden builds a community." Gluck is nearing the 150-hour mark necessary for volunteers to earn the title of master gardener.

Roughly two years ago, Rose came across an article about the farm in the Merrick Herald and seized an opportunity to get involved in the gardening course. "I was interested in farming and doing a community garden," she said, adding that she is a retired message therapist, so she had the time to pursue another passion in the 15-week course.

Today, Rose volunteers at the East Meadow Farm by helping out at its weekly farmer's market, composting excess vegetables and visiting local schools to teach students how to plant their own flowers. So far, volunteers such as Rose have visited schools in Valley Stream, Baldwin and Freeport, but Cappello-Ruggiero noted that more schools would be

added to the list.

Another way Rose contributes to the farm is by making its presence known in the Merrick community. "It's more than just a farm," she said. "They have everything."

The farm features a butterfly garden, to increase cross-pollination; a flower garden, which hosts dahlias and roses; and a beekeeping program, which highlights the importance of preserving bees. Larry Berger, president of the Cornell Cooperative Extension board of directors, said that the farm's goal is to educate the public while offering high-quality produce.

"Every single thing on this farm is sustainable," Berger said. "The veggies in the community garden are donated to the farm by my community members when they have an excess amount. If it's not sold, then it's composted."

"We want the community to come down and buy local veggies and use us as resources," said JoAnn Flora, a volunteer from East Rockaway. "And we want them to come say hello to the ladies and the ducks!"

The East Meadow Farm is open to the public on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Thursday evenings from 4 to 7 p.m. For more information, visit www.ccenassau.org or call the farm at (516) 565-5265.

Brian Stieglitz contributed to this story