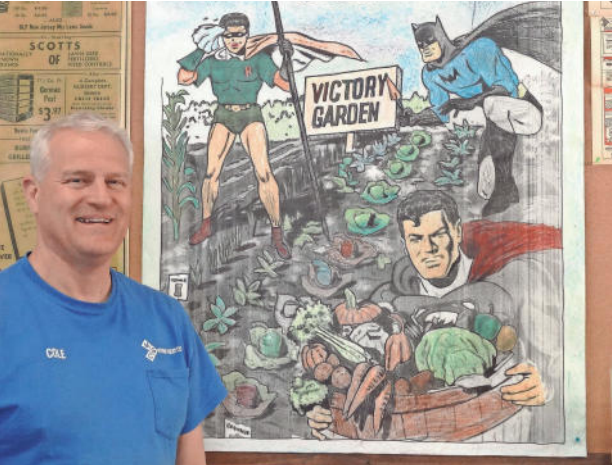


sunday best



SUSAN BLOOM/CORRESPONDENT

The staff at Mendham Garden Center in Chester include Brandon Davies, Cole Kleitsch, Adam Medaugh, Brianne Scholl, Elizabeth Loth, and Greg Loth (not pictured: Mike Duff and Joey Garth)



SUSAN BLOOM/CORRESPONDENT

Cole Kleitsch stands next to a victory garden poster colored by second graders at Dickerson Elementary School in Chester.



SUSAN BLOOM/CORRESPONDENT

Mendham Garden Center's Cole Kleitsch, left, and Greg Loth work on a repurposed shipping pallet planted with greens.



SUSAN BLOOM/CORRESPONDENT

Elizabeth Loth of Mendham Garden Center shows a display of raised bed planters.

Victories large and small

Mendham Garden Center in Chester encourages residents to grow a ‘victory garden’

SUSAN BLOOM
CORRESPONDENT

In a modern take on a historic American activity, Mendham Garden Center in Chester is encouraging community members to reap the rewards of growing a victory garden.

Popular in the United States during both WWI and WWII, victory gardens were vegetable, fruit, and herb gardens planted at private homes and parks that helped support the war effort by reducing demand on the public food supply.

Promoted through a variety of patriotic ads, the gardens also helped boost morale and camaraderie on the home front during wartime by enabling gardeners and community members to make a meaningful contribution to the effort from their own backyard.

Through a new campaign that harks back to that landmark practice, the team at Mendham Garden Supply is hoping to reignite a desire by area residents to grow a victory garden as a way to enjoy the benefits of locally-grown produce, as well as to experience a part of American history.

A pastime for a common purpose

“Veterans I’ve worked with who served in 9/11 all the way back to WWII have all talked about the sense of common purpose that wars often catalyze — from operating a B17 in Berlin to supporting the cause from right here in Morris County, there was a role for everyone to play and for many, gardening was a way to be involved,” said Cole Kleitsch, civic gardener at Mendham Garden Center and a former history and civics teacher in Newark and Plainfield.

“During the first and second world wars, homeowner-planted victory gardens that produced their own fruits and vegetables enabled some of the national infrastructure dedicated to moving food to be rededicated to the war effort and helped the country come together for a common goal,” he said. “As we see it at Mendham Garden Center, why could gardening not be the focal point of that kind of positive movement again?”

“For many people, victory gardens are new, but the concept isn’t new to America,” said Greg Loth, manager of the Chester branch of Mendham Garden Center (MGC), a 60-year-old family-owned business with additional locations in Mendham and Annandale. “It just kind of got lost in the 1970s with the growth of supermarkets, the modern food distribution industry, and the popularity of more processed foods.”

As part of its outreach efforts, MGC is promoting awareness of victory gardens at its Chester location through the presence of iconic posters colored by second graders at Chester’s Dickerson Elementary School, through partnerships with other local providers including Let It Grow Farm in Chester and area community



SUSAN BLOOM/CORRESPONDENT

Mendham Garden Center employee Brianne Scholl displays a pot of mesclun.

gardens, which will offer both opportunities to garden as well as how-to classes, and through the products MGC makes available to help residents get involved.

“We offer a lot of organic-based products at MGC to ensure that gardeners are enhancing the health of their own gardens and environment without harming those of their neighbors,” Loth said. Among the brands that MGC recommends are Espoma organic potting soil mixes and fertilizers specially formulated for certain plant types, Bonide products to help naturally protect against pests and disease, Gilberti’s plants and vegetables, products featuring mycorrhiza, which nurtures soil by creating a colony of beneficial fungus that expands the ability of a plant’s root system to metabolize food, and all of the tools, equipment, and accessories needed to grow plants and vegetables.

“We’re encouraging people to grow whatever they want, from vegetables and herbs to flowers, plants, or even a great shade tree, but most importantly to simply get out into the yard,” Loth said. “I’ve been gardening all my life and it does so much for me. We know that many people would enjoy it too but simply don’t know how to get started.”

Planting the seeds

The second graders at Dickerson Elementary School in Chester have gotten started early. “We ex-

IF YOU GO:

Mendham Garden Center

Locations :
Chester —162 Route 206; tel. 908-879-5020
Mendham — 11 West Main St.; tel. 973-543-4178
Annandale — 1306 Route 31; tel. 908-730-9008

Web : www.mendhamgardencenter.com.

Hours : 7 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Friday; 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday; and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday (all locations)

plained the history of victory gardens to our students in a very age-appropriate way,” said Principal Melissa Fair, a resident of the Flanders section of Mount Olive Township who shops at Mendham Garden Center.

Fair said she supports green and sustainable practices and was so intrigued by the garden center’s new campaign that she brought it into her school.

“At the time, Mendham Garden Center had one poster up and I thought it was beautiful,” said Fair. “We have indoor recess at our K-2 school when there’s inclement weather and we thought that coloring posters would be a great project for our students on a rainy day.”

Building a brief lesson around the importance of gardening for their second graders, “it was a small enrichment for the students, the beginning of a broad scaffold of information that will help them make a positive connection when they learn about it again as they get older,” she said.

Keeping it simple

In today’s fast-paced, digital era, “Internet access has made gardening complicated, but we hope to keep it simple for people and help them understand the basics and the concept that less is more so that it’s not an overwhelming endeavor and they’ll give it a try,” said Loth. “Gardening provides a good feeling, giving you time to think, be present, daydream, and enjoy the process of growing something, and we’re excited about what we’re doing to engage the community in this positive activity and the rewards it brings to people and the environment.”

“Weeds won’t pull themselves and beans will only grow as fast as they’ll grow — there’s nothing your phone can do to help you,” said Kleitsch, who hopes residents will forego their electronic devices for a while and look to gardening as a fun and productive hobby that can become a family-based activity. “We hope that people will consider a gardening-related gift for Mother’s Day or Father’s Day this year because it can create precious time with that person. This fall, we’ll also be offering lessons on canning and will be carrying all the accessories needed to pursue it. We want to share the information and spread the love,” he said.

Regardless of the space you have, Kleitsch said that a victory garden is its own reward. “The gardens may be small, but the victories will be large,” he said.

“It’s great to see more people doing it themselves,” Loth agreed. “That’s the real victory.”

Send your garden photos and stories to Planning Editor Eva Abreu, eabreu@gannettnj.com.