

Published June 8th, 2011

## Merriewood Garden Full of Fruitful Lessons

By Cathy Tyson



Garden teacher Gantt Charping at the Merriewood Children's Garden Photo Cathy Tyson

smooth - to engage the senses. For bigger children lessons can revolve around composting and recycling, and why the fruit isn't ready to pick quite yet.

"The kids prefer to eat rather than weed," said Charping, even munching on veggies like eggplant or kale. They love the chickens. A favorite request is to check for eggs and make omelets. He explains that because they have been raised by humans, the chickens have "imprinted" on people - so they think they're part of the family, consequently very tolerant.

This year there are more raised beds to combat hungry gophers, with wire mesh buried under the soil. One teepee made with sticks is already partially covered in a grape vine, another with green beans - edible forts. Gantt placed a red flag in the top of one of the teepees, "and all of sudden it's now a castle with dragons."

It's easy to see why Merriewood management wants to encourage Charping to get his teaching certificate. He's currently taking early childhood education classes at DVC. Although he has a non-traditional history, clearly he brings a range of knowledge to the garden. He worked on a farm during the summer while he was at the Evergreen State College, after graduation he was a field biologist doing endangered bird work, then came back to the Bay Area and got a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy from California Institute of Integral Studies.

When he's not busy with the garden - it's only a three-quarter time job, Charping has his own business designing and installing organic, sustainable gardens for homeowners, GaiaCentric Gardens. He calls it "food scaping;" [www.gaiacentricgardens.com](http://www.gaiacentricgardens.com).

Who knew a piece of land could be so productive in so many ways? On a recent gray morning Merriewood Children's Center Garden Teacher Gantt Charping gave Lafayette Parks Trails and Recreation Commissioners a tour of the one-acre organic garden near Burton Valley Elementary School.

Although it's been a cool and rainy spring, raised beds are ready for corn transplants from the green house and fruit trees display what will be a bounty of apples, vines with definitely un-ripe tiny grapes along with blackberries can be found throughout the learning garden. The City of Lafayette lets the school use the land that would otherwise be the very edge of the Lafayette Community Park.

As the summer heats up, garlic, onions, corn, zucchini and lots of potatoes will grow under the watchful eyes of Charping and a bevy of little assistants from the Merriewood Children's Center. Merriewood offers nursery school for two through five year olds and before and after school programs for Burton Valley students, along with summer programs.

The kids help with all aspects of the garden from planting to harvesting. Lessons will vary depending on the age of the kids - for preschoolers that could mean finding a flower of every color or collecting things that are rough or

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