

A garden beneath their wings

Hidden Wings students plant herb garden at Old Mission Santa Ines

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A new herb garden is taking root in Solvang. On what had been an empty space on Old Mission Santa Ines Property – down the hill from the parking lot – mint, sage, thyme and 17 other herbs are starting to sprout. With no pun intended, it's a garden with a mission.

The project is the brainchild of the Rev. Jim Billington, co-founder of Hidden Wings, the Solvang school for young adults on the autism spectrum. He was looking for something the students could produce and sell. Herbs were the answer.

"We thought about a vegetable garden first, but it would have been a nightmare keeping the deer away," Billington laughed. "Herbs are drought and deer resistant."

Billington is reluctant about taking too much credit for the project. Every Friday, several Capuchin Franciscan seminarians affiliated with the mission spend a few hours at Hidden Wings helping out with a music class. Additionally, every Saturday, Hidden Wings students go on an outdoor adventure, and



AMY MAY PHOTOS, CONTRIBUTOR

Hidden Wings students and volunteers plant an herb garden below Old Mission Santa Ines on May 6. It was designed by Steve Schulz, far left.

that sometimes has them hiking trails on the mission's grounds.

"I reached out to [Old Mission Santa Ines pastor] Father Matt about that bare section of property and asked about planting an herb garden. He was all for it," Billington said.

Billington next contacted Santa Ynez Valley Botanic Garden Board President Puck Erickson Lohnas for guidance. The well-known

landscape architect connected him with one of the Garden's founders and board members, Steve Schulz.

Schulz is a landscape contractor, and played a critical role in the Botanic Garden's master plan and path layout. His expertise was essential in helping Billington make the Hidden Wings herb garden a reality.

Schulz drew his inspiration from the Vatican Gardens. The very formal Vatican Gardens cover about half of Vatican City's 108 acres. The concentric circles and geometric patterns he'd seen there seemed the perfect model for what he wanted to accomplish for Hidden Wings, Schulz said.

With his sketch complete, deciding on and acquiring the actual plants was the next project for Schulz.

"We went with perennials like mint, sage and thyme and aromatics, including santolina," he said.

After Schulz supervised stringing out his design at the site, Buellton's Windmill Nursery came through with the 232 plants.

Nearly a dozen Hidden Wings students plus volunteers took on the planting chores on May 6. Billington was joined by his wife and Hidden Wings co-founder Dr. Julia Billington during the several hours it took to get everything in the ground and hooked up to the water sprinkler lines.

"We had a wonderful time. Everyone was laughing and really enjoying themselves," Billington said, "All we need now to finish it is a dump truck full of mulch, if anyone want to donate it."

The plan is to eventually be able to cultivate a sufficient quantity of herbs that Hidden Wings could sell them at the weekly Farmers Market in Solvang.

"The students who participate would get to keep any money earned," Billington said.

At the heart of it, he explained, the herb garden is another way to teach Hidden Wings students about teamwork, organization, planning, and a little bit of finance – all skills that will allow them to soar just a little bit higher in their everyday lives.



Hidden Wings co-founder, the Rev. Jim Billington, sitting, leads his students and volunteers in planting an herb garden in Solvang.