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Garden offers nature trail for children

Officials try to boost appeal to families

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RANCHO SAN DIEGO – The Water Conservation Garden's newest attraction is billed as a fun getaway for children.

The 3- and 4-year-olds who ventured there yesterday could attest to that.

“Can we take my shoes off?” Marilyn Downing, 3, asked when she saw the large sandbox along the new Children's Discovery Trail, which opened yesterday.

Abner Fuentes, 3, jumped out of the sandbox and ran to take a close look at the rabbit figure he saw next to a tree with a funny-looking face on it. The tree drew another boy, who waved and said “Hi” when he spotted the face.



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune
Jackie Orozco (left) and Daniel Assofi, both 4, saw colorful birdhouses hanging from a tree as preschoolers from Cuyamaca College's Early Childhood Learning Center toured the new Children's Discovery Trail yesterday.

The children's reactions drew smiles from officials who say they've been working to make the 5-acre garden at Cuyamaca College more appealing to families.

Tucked behind the garden's irrigation displays, the new trail is meant as a whimsical retreat that will teach children about trees, plants and animals that are able to survive with little water.

“Kids have very little contact with nature today,” said Marty Eberhardt, the garden's executive director. “We have to provide opportunities for kids to have contact with nature.”

She said it's easier for children to understand the garden's water conservation message when they have an appreciation for nature.

New interactive signs along the garden's main path that are aimed at older children also were unveiled yesterday. The trail and signs were funded with grants from Las Patronas and the Hans and Margaret Doe Charitable Trust.

The Water Conservation Garden is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. seven days a week and is at 12122 Cuyamaca College Drive W., Rancho San Diego. Admission is free. For more information, call (619) 660-0614.

Eberhardt also thanked Cuyamaca College during the ceremony. The college recently extended its lease until 2033 and gave it more room to expand. A children's garden will be built on the new space.

The 7-year-old garden showcases water conservation through a series of gardens. Programs include landscaping, gardening and art classes and school tours.

The children who visited yesterday are enrolled at Cuyamaca College's Early Childhood Learning Center. Most of their parents are students at the community college.

While exploring, they stopped at a potting shed at the end of the Children's Discovery Trail. They went inside, donned aprons and planted seeds into small dirt pots.

Cookies and drinks waited for them on a table nearby, but they wanted to keep walking and see the garden's exhibits.

They stopped at the bird and butterfly garden and looked around with binoculars that were given to them.

“I see a hummingbird! I see a hummingbird!” one boy shouted.

Another boy yelled: “I see an elephant! I see a giraffe!” referring to the sculpted animal figures in the garden.

Their teacher, Vicki Greco, sighed.

“This is what builds their appreciation for nature,” she said.

Staff librarian Erin Hobbs contributed to this report.

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Connecting with nature



Laura Ardilla, 3, of Rancho San Diego pretended to be a frog as she waited with her parents yesterday in the Water Conservation Garden for the opening of the Children's Discovery Trail at Cuyamaca College. Officials are trying to make the garden more appealing to families. *Laura Embry / Union-Tribune photos*