

La Rocque Garden

By Gloria Russell
The Sun Staff

WESTERLY — Like turning lemons into lemonade, Westerly resident Raymond LaRocque turned a career-ending injury into a new hobby and business enterprise.

When a spinal cord injury took him out of sales and put him into a wheelchair five years ago, LaRocque took up gardening. A friend who knew of his interest in gardening built him a box on stilts.

"He has a beautiful garden," LaRocque said, adding that his friend knew how much he enjoyed watching him garden with his wife.

"That's how I got into it," LaRocque said.

With a garden on stilts, he said, the soil was at a level he could reach and work with. It made it possible for him to experiment with a hobby he had always wanted to know more about.

Soon, the former computer consultant put his salesman skills to work and began making and marketing Accessible Gardens.

Although LaRocque was enthusiastic about working at the raised bed,



DANIEL HYLAND / The Sun

Westerly Health Center resident Mike Cofone, above, works at the accessible garden.

his primary objective in developing his eventual business enterprise was to get more people interested in gardening.

"I didn't start out wanting to start a company and a business. I wanted to start out just educating people like myself and others and I'm finding the bigger market in people who just can't bend down, have bad backs, and have bad knees. Being able to stand upright is a better way for them to garden."

"I decided to let people know about being able to garden this way." And with that decision, Accessible Gardens was born."

Following research to learn if there were any products available for gardening in the manner he had adopted, LaRocque discovered there was nothing suitable on the market, and with typical American ingenuity, came up with his own ideas.

The unique wheelchair-accessible garden he designed is large enough to grow an assortment of organic vegetables, herbs, and a variety of edible and decorative flowers.

And this idea appealed to Gerry McVeigh, activities director at the Westerly Health Center. She believed some of the residents there, especially those who are garden enthusiasts, would enjoy the opportunity to garden this special way.

LaRocque said the raised beds are available in a variety of rot-resistant woods, such as cedar, teak, mahogany and pressure-treated and come in different sizes. They are sold as complete kits, all pre-drilled, pre-cut and ready for assembly.

"I have a partner who's a professional engineer and a professional carpenter who prepares the kit. I do all the selling," LaRocque said.

And, best of all, he adds, there is still time for people to take advantage of a second growing season — all the way into the fall.

"You've still got a lot of things you can grow. You can always plant beans — those



Ray LaRocque, above left, who developed the accessible garden, chats with 94-year-old Westerly Health Center resident Mike Cofone, right, who is busy watering the plants including basil, eggplant, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and beans.

Community

★ Garden

from page 13

and greens, your lettuces, your chards and your kales are better off in the spring or the fall. Broccoli is great for the fall. Depending on what time of the year it is you might even have time to grow some peppers, but cucumbers and eggplants

are usually started earlier.”

The eight-foot by 32-inch beds and garden trellis the residents used at the Health Center are well on their way to producing a harvest, having been carefully cultivated.

With the trellis design, LaRocque recommends planting Morning Glories on one side

and beans on the other.

The units he has been selling are constructed of pressure-treated lumber because it's the least expensive. Cedar, teak and mahogany can be significantly more costly than pressure-treated wood — sometimes 3 to 5 times more expensive, LaRocque noted.

A single four-foot bed starts for as little as \$180, “and they go up from there,” he said. Locally he is able to provide the full set — two 8' garden beds, organic soil, trellis

and even spring seedlings for a little over \$1,000.

This inventor says, “It's just so gratifying and satisfying when you work in a garden and connect more to nature.”

A family man with a wife and four children, LaRocque said the business “gave him something to get involved in. I always liked to get my hands in the dirt. I can't imagine anyone in this world not getting an appreciation and a joy out of planting a simple bean seed and watching it evolve into what it does.”

