

## *The Cottage Garden Home Nursery Program*

• **Barbara Audley and Celia Riahi**

We are a licensed large family day care in Amherst, MA. We feel honored in having this opportunity to share a picture of our program with our Waldorf early childhood colleagues. While we both are individual WECAN members, we are currently pursuing full membership in WECAN as a home program. This process has become very important to us. We want to be able to tell the world what we stand for and be able to use “Waldorf” in our advertising. We speak—in our conversations with applicants and parents and in our current advertising—of having our personal educational philosophies rooted in anthroposophy, but we feel that membership would grant us a different level of standing in our community.

We are housed in a lovely home with a large, fenced-in back yard and two rooms dedicated to the children, although we use the whole first floor. We are licensed for ten children, with nine enrolled for next school year, seven or eight per day; their ages range from sixteen months to four-and-a-half. We would like to share a picture of us and of our day with our wonderful children and describe why we have come to offer this program after many years in other Waldorf settings.

Celia was led to Waldorf education with the birth of her daughter thirty-five years ago. She ran a licensed Home Day Care, called “The Other Mother,” in New York City for ten years, then taught in established Waldorf schools in New York and Massachusetts for the next twenty-three. Barbara was led to Waldorf education indirectly, through her work with children and families in inner cities. After a time, she began to wonder if a method had been developed that would serve to educate the souls of children. As a response to this question, she discovered Waldorf education and knew she had found what she had been searching for. Barbara also has a diploma in Speech Formation from the Goetheanum.

We decided that we wanted to use our energies and experience now, in this stage of our lives, to provide a warm and cozy place for the littlest children to have a

first group experience. Doing this in our home allows us to provide what we think is important for this age group. We can organize the rooms, our rhythm, and our lives around what we do at The Cottage Garden. We often tell parents that we offer “slow childcare.” Here things are implicit rather than explicit—we sing, tell little stories, do tiny puppet plays, and do housework that needs to be done. We cook with the children, we wash hands with them; but truly, we are helping them learn social skills and self-care skills so they can begin, in their sweet little ways, to build a sense of their own independence within a loving community. Patience, warmth and love are the skills and qualities necessary to provide this for the children. We are able to make decisions, changes, and adjustments to the program that we feel are right for what we do. It is pleasant to have this independence and flexibility in deciding how to form our program after many years in schools where things are necessarily more structured.

The children arrive between 8 and 8:30 each morning, Monday through Thursday. We play inside until 9:15 when we have our snack of hot cereal—rice cream and oatmeal, each, twice a week—and fresh fruit. We grind rice during the week with the children for our rice cream cereal. We eat family style at our child-sized table, singing a blessing to begin and a thank you to end our meals. It amazes us how even the littlest children reach out their hands and sing the songs. One little girl, during her first week with us, held out her hands to her parents at their supper table, expecting them to do the same and to know the songs. After changing diapers or going to the potty, we have what we call our “tummy rest.” Each child has a pillow with his or her symbol on it, and we lie down for ten minutes while one of us sings some lullabies and then tells a nursery rhyme story before we go outside.

We then go to our porch, where the individual cubbies are. We dress to go out, which can take up to thirty minutes with the little ones who need lots of help. We sing and have little rhymes as we dress and often go out in shifts so the ones who are ready do not have

to wait. Then outside we go to the sandbox, climbing logs, slide, tunnel, hammock swing and the beloved lounge chair, which has become a favorite plaything. It has been a boat, a house, bunk beds and a restaurant. In the warm weather there is the wading pool and sprinkler—whew, our water bill has gone up this summer! They play with everything out there—the little ones just finding their balance in walking on our sloped lawn, digging in the sand or the mud, looking under logs for “squirmy-wormies,” planting in their real and make believe gardens, grinding rice or felting with Celia. We rake leaves in the fall, slide on the snow in the winter—and winter is long here in Massachusetts—and play in the water in the warm weather. There are “boo boos” and hugs and kisses, and rhyming games and little snacks for the “horsies.” We found that we needed to provide snacks for the “horsies” because the children actually began to chomp away at the grass! The children are always moving—crawling, running, jumping, busy bees. Happy little busy bees!

We try to go out whenever we can, but there are icy cold days when we do stay in. We are lucky enough to have an inside climbing structure with a slide attached. It fits in our living room and has become a fixture there all winter. The rocker boards\*, a rocking boat and all the simple toys we have keep everyone busy inside. Most of the soft toys and dolls have been handmade by Celia or by our friend, Elisabeth Radysh, toymaker extraordinaire!

We come inside by noon so we can wash, change diapers, go potty and then have lunch. Lunch is always a thick, blended vegetable soup with a grain added. After lunch, when one child leaves at 1:00, we all go to sleep. The littlest ones are put in their playpens with their own down throw and sheet or sheepskin. The older ones each have a mat, covered in a flannel sheet, a pillow and an individual down throw. Barbara usually sings to the little ones, while Celia goes to the older ones, tells a made up story and sings them lullabies. Everyone goes to sleep within 15 minutes and sometimes we lie down, too, for a short rest. When we wake the children up at 3:00, we have a little snack prepared; then it is time to go home again at 3:30.

This picture is just a little more than bare bones. So much happens in between what we have described here. We are also active in supporting the families and children in learning everyday skills and with community building. Additionally, we have the business side to our enterprise with licensing, paperwork, contracts and all that goes with the administrative side of this work, which we hope to share with you in the future. Also, please note our website for more information and photos: [www.thecottagegarden.org](http://www.thecottagegarden.org).

\*Rocker boards can be ordered from Larry Fox at the Fellowship Community in Spring Valley, NY. Contact the Fellowship Community office at 845-356-8494.

