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These gardeners were all winners in the annual sunflower contest sponsored by the Secret Garden. At rear, Nancy French, Peter French, Marcy Wemple, Bill Botelho, Luann Botelho and Rose Hinkley. In front are Cara Liberati, Olivia McGowan, Casey Westall, Jessy Primiano and Sophie Primiano.

Sunflower winners announced

The Secret Garden held their annual sunflower contest and announced the winners who grew the tallest plants as well as the largest blooms.

This year's grand champion, who grew the largest overall plant, was Peter French, whose plant was 144-inches tall. The largest bloom was 15-inches across and grown by Joseph Lesniak.

In the children's division, top height awards went to Jamie Waldo, 108-inches; Stephen Cirella, 105-inches, and Casey Westall at 97-inches. Largest blooms in the kids division went to Ben Waldo/

Jessy Primiano, with a 12 1/4-inch flower; Casey Westall, 7 3/4-inch bloom and Payton and Tyler Washburn, who grew a 7 1/2-inch flower.

In the teen category, Paul Botelho grew a 141-inch plant; Cara Liberati, 132-inches; Olivia McGowan, 101 1/2-inches. For bloom size, teen winners were, Cara Liberati, 7-inches; Paul Botelho, 6-inches, and Olivia McGowan, 4-inches.

Adult winners were Margaret Crowley, who grew a 136-inch plant; Dan Crowley, 133-inches, and Ken Lombardo, 124-inches.

In the bloom size division, adult winners were, Nancy French and LuAnn Botelho, with a 13 1/2-inch flower; Bill Botelho, 13 3/8-inches and Dan Crowley, 13 1/4-inches.

Seniors who grew the tallest plants included Dorothy Denault, at 132 1/2-inches; Joseph Lesniak, 113 1/2-inches, and Rose Hinkley, at 103-inches. Seniors who grew the widest blooms were Rose Hinkley, at 11-inches; Dorothy Denault, with a 10 1/4-inch flower and Peter Denault, at 10-inches.

Ribbons were presented to the winners in each category by the staff of the Secret Garden.

Seniors getting technical

As today's seniors search for ways to keep their minds active, some are turning from tradition to the latest gadgets typically reserved for the younger generation.

"Aging is about taking on new challenges for the mind," said Dr. Elizabeth Zelinski, a professor of gerontology and psychology at the Leonard Davis School of Gerontology at the University of Southern California, who says video games are a good way to keep older adults' minds active.

"Like kids, seniors are playing games with people all around the world," she said.

Recently, health plan provider Evercare surveyed 100 Americans turning 100 and discovered that one in seven has played video games. PopCap Games in Seattle reported that its Internet video games have been downloaded more than 200 million times since the company was founded in 2000; a survey last year showed that 47 percent of the players were older than 50.

Retailers are seeing a trend, too. Billed as "a treadmill for the mind," Nintendo's hand-held Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day game with math, memory and brain jumbles is attracting the attention of graying gamers, as is the company's interactive Wii system that lets seniors compete in sports like bowling and golf. Some senior centers are hosting Wii tournaments.

"Research shows that whether it's a video game, a board game or a simple card game, exercising the mind keeps it young and vital," said Gary Leiter, owner of Home Instead Senior Care serving all of Rhode Island.

Researchers from the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, found that individuals with high brain reserve – the cumulative effect of formal education and mentally challenging work and leisure pursuits – have a 46-percent decreased risk of dementia than those with low brain reserve. Results showed that even a late-life surge in mental activity can stave off the effects of dementia.

One deterrent for many seniors who would like to stay mentally active is lack of companionship – particularly for those older adults who live alone.

"Sometimes seniors just need a little encouragement from family and friends to help them pursue interests that can keep their minds stimulated," said Leiter, who suggests a group game night or taking the senior to a concert or interesting lecture.

"Our caregivers see positive changes in seniors' attitudes and well-being when they regularly play cards and other games, complete puzzles or simply listen to music," he said. "And never underestimate the power of conversation."