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## Educator of the Year

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### *Distant Hill Gardens of Walpole NH*

Distant Hill Gardens is dedicated to inspiring and empowering both children and adults to cultivate an intimate connection to the natural world. They hope to serve as a model of environmental stewardship and to motivate visitors to become more informed stewards of the land.

Michael and Kathy Nerrie started Distant Hill Gardens in 1979 with twenty-one acres; through buying and trading pieces of land Distant Hill is now a certified Tree Farm, with fifty-eight contiguous acres in Walpole and Alstead NH that holds a treasure trove of natural beauty. Some of the highlights of Distant Hill are listed below:

- **Cultivated Gardens with over 350 varieties of labeled plants**
- **A large biodiverse inventory of native plants**
- **Ten vernal pools, as well as swamps and other wetlands**
- **A boardwalk over a floating cranberry bog**
- **A Stone Circle built with stones from the property**
- **Managed forests supporting over 30 species of native trees**
- **A three-acre 'Milkweed Meadow' for monarch butterflies**
- **An eight-acre sugarbush with over 250 taps for producing Maple Syrup**
- **Dozens of Creative Sculptures**

- throughout the gardens
- **A small Christmas tree plantation**
  - **Alternative energy systems powering their Passive Solar Home**
  - **Miles of walking trails**
  - **Wildlife friendly forests**
  - **Many unique geological features, such as large pegmatite boulders and stretched-pebble conglomerate outcroppings.**

The Nerries started the development of Distant Hill for their own enjoyment and then took interest in expanding and sharing with others to start to educate by example. For over fifteen years they have participated in Open Garden Days. Eager to share their property and the beautiful gardens they started to plant back in 1990. In 2014 they expanded these Open Garden Days to have one each month. It was about three years ago that the education focus shifted beyond the cultivated gardens to their entire property.



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## Educator of the Year continued

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Michael has taken the lead on the education initiatives on the property and worked with an Antioch intern to get started. He shares that Antioch had a big part in helping develop what has unfolded over the past few years by helping him make connections with people who helped to educate him on what they have at Distant Hill and how special it is. Michael now works



with Lionel Chute, David Howell, Jeff Littleton, Steve Roberge, and Tom Wessels to offer educational workshops showcasing the natural history of Distant Hill Gardens. Over the years the Nerries have worked to offer public workshop on topics such as geology, vernal pools, bogs, tree id, mushroom id, wildflower and fern id, composting, vegetable gardening, garlic planting, mushroom growing, solar energy, and passive solar homes. Each of these opportunities draws crowds of 20-80 people. As Michael shared “You don’t have to go very far to find interesting and unknown things in nature” The Nerries enjoy the opportunity to share this passion and excitement for learning with others.

Overall Distant Hill is a mild landscape, not too steep which makes it accessible to more people, but the Nerries have partnered with ACCESS a Keene NH based non-profit helping people with disabilities to make it become even more

accessible yet. Over the past two years they have worked to create a ½ mile loop that connects four vernal pools and a black ash seep. This was made possible through funding from the Quabbin to Cardigan Partnership. In the spring of 2015 they plan to apply for another grant to finish this loop with smooth compacted gravel surface suitable for wheelchairs and strollers. Their goal is to build a trail network throughout Distant Hill Gardens. They hope to connect many of the vernal pools, wetlands, and other points of interest on the property with easy to navigate “Trails-for-All.”

The Nerries have been involved with the Monarch Watch, a nonprofit education, conservation, and research program focused on the Monarch Butterfly for many years. They have tagged Monarch butterflies and have even had one of

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those butterflies recovered in Mexico. Since the late nineties they have been encouraging milkweed on their property. They manage for it with a mowing schedule that keeps the milkweed competitive and they have posted signage about Monarch ecology and habitat on their site to educate the public. This is just one way that the Nerries' garden for wildlife and value the role of gardening for insects and birds as much for the beauty of the flowers.

Michael and Kathy are naturalists always seeking to better understand and steward the natural resources on their property. They are also amazing people and giving community members. The CCCD is honored to recognize Distant Hill Gardens

and Michael and Kathy Nerrie as the 2014 Educator of the Year.

Please visit [www.distanthillgardens.org](http://www.distanthillgardens.org) to find out about events and learn more about their vision of developing Distant Hill Gardens into a venue for environmental, horticultural, and nature-based classes, workshops, and research & to make the land and all of its resources available to local educational facilities, educators, students, and the public.

