



*Eagle Scout candidate Thomas Meehan adds the finishing touches to the entrance of the Racebrook Tract.*

## Eagle Scout Project Beautifies Racebrook Tract

*By Laura Fantarella - Orange Town News Correspondent*

When two town officials mentioned cleaning up the entrance to the Racebrook Road tract as a possible Eagle Scout project, candidate Thomas Meehan took it as a sign that it was a job that really needed doing. "I had asked my Scoutmaster and my church leaders if they knew of any worthwhile projects and they did not have any ideas," the 16-year-old Meehan said. But when he approached First Selectman Jim Zeoli and Conservation Commission Chair Sharon Ewen, both mentioned the Racebrook Road walking tract, and the need of attention. When Meehan visited the site, he agreed to take on the project. "It looked like a jungle, it was overrun with poison ivy and Virginia creeper," he said.

So with a lot of help from Ewen and his Courier Road neighbor, Mike Arata, owner of Arata Landscaping, Meehan came up with a plan to landscape and refurbish the area. "Sharon wanted the area to look like natural woods; Mike wanted to make it look more landscaped and defined. So I tried to strike a balance between the two," the Amity High School junior said. He set out to raise \$2,000 in donations from local residents and businesses to cover the cost of new plantings, signage and mulch. "It was more difficult than my past fundraising efforts where I sold chocolates and popcorn!" he said. But with the generosity of businesses like Grillo Services (Milford) which donated all the soil and mulch; Soundview Landscape Supply (West Haven) which donated several varieties of trees; as well as money donations from friends, relatives, organizations and businesses like Orange Rotary, Chip's Restaurant, Jim Ronai's Competitive Edge, and the Orange Town News, Meehan was able to meet his goal. "I did not realize how expensive landscaping is," he said.

He spent almost a year planning and fundraising for the project. "That part was difficult. It was definitely more enjoyable when the actual outdoor work started," Meehan said. The fun began when he assembled his crew, mostly fellow scouts from his own Troop 721, a few Amity High friends, and his mom JoAnn, sister Katie, and grandmother, Bev Chambers. "Getting people to keep showing up to work was the hardest part. I even used Facebook to get kids here," he said. In all, he logged 700 hours over nearly a year of weekends, added mulch and 115 native plants like winterberries, ferns, azaleas, mountain laurel, rhododendrons and forsythia and cleared barrels full of invasive plants from the trails and entrance. One of his favorite parts of the experience was interacting with the Orange Volunteer Firemen who brought a fire truck to the property to power wash several benches and kiosks that were practically black with dirt and mold. "I had a lot of fun with the fire department," Meehan said. "I got to direct the fire truck!" The finishing touches will be 25 signs donated by Avenue Awards labeling plants and flowers in the area and birdhouses built by Cub Scout Troop 922 that are expected to be installed later this fall.

Meehan first joined Cub Scouts in second grade and went on to become a Boy Scout in sixth grade. He was inspired to earn his Eagle Scout distinction after reading a biography about Hollywood director Stephen Spielberg. "There was a picture in the book of Spielberg in an Eagle Scout uniform and I always remembered it," he said. According to Meehan, less than two percent of Scouts earn the Eagle distinction which requires candidates to complete a list of requirements and perform an Eagle Scout project before age 18.

Ewen said the Commission and the Garden Club viewed the property after the project was completed and were very happy with the results. "Thomas worked very hard and we're delighted with the outcome," she said. "The property had been neglected and really needed to be cleaned up. It is hard to be a steward of over 500 acres of open space in town and we are always happy when community members volunteer to help out."

Now as he surveys his project with pride, Meehan can reflect on how much he learned from the experience. "I knew absolutely nothing about gardening when I began, now I can name many of the plants on the trail," he said. It also taught him organizational skills, how to handle and budget money, how to be a leader and site foreman, and just possibly gave him a glimpse of a future occupation. "People told me I was good at this," Meehan said.