

Green Thumbs Up in Central Florida



by Laressa Nelson, *Natural Awakenings* Assistant Editor



Volunteers of Ocoee United Methodist Community Garden

Green things are *literally* growing in Central Florida, lots of them...or rather, *plots* of them. Community gardens have been sprouting from the thought-seeds of neighborhood activists throughout Central Florida for a few years now and are coming into full bloom with support from city and county governments and other philanthropic organizations.

Physical Activity, Better Eating and Other Health Benefits

One of those organizations, Get Active Orlando (GAO), recently initiated Festival Park Community Garden near downtown Orlando on Robinson Street. GAO is a partnership comprised of more than 24 organizations. One of these, University of Central Florida, applied for and was awarded a research grant from the National Institutes of Health to implement and then evaluate the short-term effects of community gardening as one of a few approaches to enhance physical activity among urban dwellers.

While this community garden may have come together a little more

quickly and easily than others because it was required for the grant, the real power behind it came from the voice of citizens, beginning with just one voice. "Festival Park would not have happened without Richard Powell," says Garden Coordinator Tia Meer. "He wanted a community garden downtown and pursued it by setting up meetings with City Commissioner Patty Sheehan and getting together a list of citizens in support of the idea." When it comes to community initiatives, explains Meer, "There's strength in numbers."

Neighborhoods, churches and schools are fertile grounds for such grassroots organizing. All it takes is the coming together of a few individuals who recognize the many benefits of gardening together.

Immediately recognizable are organic gardening's combined health benefits of outdoor exercise, which not only keeps people fit but also exposes them to vitamin D from the sun. Maintaining an individual plot between 48 and 96 square feet generally requires a minimum of one to three

hours per week—whether it be watering, weeding, fertilizing or harvesting. Another health benefit is the ability to cheaply increase one's intake of fresh, chemical-free fruits and vegetables.

Furthermore, the feeling of achievement received when nurturing something from seed to productive plant is the biggest bonus of gardening for most—yet it may be the most difficult to measure quantitatively. Harvesting the literal fruits of one's labor creates a sense of accomplishment that cannot be duplicated by other forms of exercise. Another intangible but powerful benefit is reconnecting with nature and the food we eat in a way well-known to our ancestors and lost to industrialized farming. "Many people join community gardens because they have little knowledge about gardening and want to learn from others," says Meer.

Perhaps the greatest difference between backyard and community gardening, however, is the way community gardening provides the opportunity for social interaction among individuals and the building of community that comes from teamwork.

Strengthening Community, Reducing Crime and Feeding the Needy

The benefit of eating those fruits and veggies may be especially notable in communities where fresh produce is difficult to come by. For example, in the Parramore Community Garden, "Families really rely on these gardens for their fresh fruits and vegetables," says Garden President Bridget Monroe. "There is no major grocery store or even a produce stand anywhere near here." That leads to another important aspect: saving money on transportation (to the store) and on the grocery bill. Monroe explains, "If you can pay less than \$1

RESOURCES FOR STARTING YOUR OWN COMMUNITY GARDEN

NATIONAL

American Community Gardening Association, www.communitygarden.org
National Gardening Association, www.garden.org
American Horticulture Society, www.ahs.org

LOCAL EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES AND ASSISTANCE

Orange County/UF IFAS Extension Education Center
<http://orange.ifas.ufl.edu/>
Ed Thralls, Extension Agent, Urban Horticulture
407-254-9200

Harry P. Leu Gardens
www.leugardens.org
Robert Bowden, Executive Director
407-246-2620

Florida School of Holistic Living
www.holisticlivingschool.org
Emily Ruff, Director of Education
407-595-3731

Simple Living Institute
www.simplelivinginstitute.org/garden-startup.html
Tia Meer, Founder & President
321-228-4310

LOCAL PROJECTS NEEDING VOLUNTEERS AND/OR RESOURCES

UCF Arboretum—offers open volunteer days, Wed and Thurs, no long-term commitment required. Contact Tina Richards at 407-823-3583.

The Garden at DePugh—needs skilled volunteers & materials for construction and start-up. Visit ourwholecommunity.org or contact joann@stmargaretmary.org.

UCF/Get Active Orlando/NIH Study—needs urban land on which to start community garden. Contact tiameer@gmail.com or jill.leslie@live.com



for a pack of seeds and grow organic produce, then it becomes affordable for anyone." In addition, notes Ed Thralls—an agent for the Orange County/UF IFAS Extension Education Center—initial concerns with vandalism and crime nearby were quickly abated as the Parramore Garden helped "move crime off the street."

Helping relieve poverty and hunger reduces crime, another benefit of community gardens. "Community gardens on public lands [such as city parks] activate underutilized space and provide free security because people are coming and going at different times, and they're watching," says Commissioner Patty Sheehan, who was crucial in the development of Festival Park and Colonialtown Community Gardens and wants to see "three or four more. I hope to become known as the queen of community gardens."

Robert Bowden, who has started and visited community gardens from St. Louis to Philadelphia, says he has seen first-hand their value "not just from a nutrition standpoint but also from a take-back-the-community aspect." He has seen crack houses turned into fertile fields that bring neighbors together and has met homeless individuals for whom a 4' x 20' plot in the middle of the city is the main source of food. In urban community gardening, Bowden says, "You learn to plant a little bit for the people who are hungry; for somebody who may not be as fortunate as you and may need that food to eat." As Executive Director of Leu Gardens, Bowden now teaches and consults citizen gardeners on behalf of the City of Orlando.

Feeding their community's needy inspired Pastor Ernie Post, Garden Coordinator David Rieke, and the congregation of Ocoee Oaks United Methodist Church to undertake the ambitious challenge of turning a $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre lot on church property into one large working garden starting back

in the fall of 2008. "We give away most of what we grow to the Christian Service Center in Ocoee, which feeds 250 people a day," says Rieke. In a typical week, the church can donate 4 to 5 bushels of green beans, along with 30 bushels of potatoes in the fall, and in the winter, plenty of greens. "We've also given to parents through our pre-school program and to the congregation, encouraging them to share with their neighbors in need."

Local churches interested in promoting health among their congregations joined forces to obtain a grant from the Winter Park Health Foundation to start "Our Whole Community, Inc."—a five-partner, multi-denominational collaborative of churches from Winter Park, Maitland and Eatonville, whose mission is to make it easier for people to be healthier and do healthy things. "We decided we could be more effective and reach more people if we got outside of our congregational walls and combined efforts," says Garden Vice-President Joann Ruiz. "Everybody's concerned about their health, and that's a good common ground for community building." The collaborative started a community garden at Winter Park Presbyterian Church about two years ago. Now members of the various congregations attend events and programs at each other's churches. Congregation gardeners are encouraged to donate 10% of their harvest to the Winter Park Emergency Services Food Pantry and to participate in making healthy meals for the community's low-income residents. The collaborative recently received another grant from Winter Park Health Foundation to start a multi-generational garden at DePugh Nursing Center on West Morse Boulevard.

Ensuring Future Food Purity and Security for All

Even for those people who don't need the food to survive, growing some of your own is a pro-active way to declare your food independence and self-reliance. Robert Bowden adds: "It's valuable learning how to grow safer vegetables that are free of pesticides and chemicals. Isn't it better to know what went into growing your food; that

everything on your plate is safe to eat and is highly nutritious? For example, green beans lose 50% of their nutritional value within seven days of being picked. If you pick and cook them yourself within minutes after picking, you keep all those nutrients."

This is especially important for our youth, Bowden explains. "Gardening not only helps young people learn about the good nutrition of high-flavor, low-calorie meals, it also teaches a life skill that young people don't normally have anymore." In the Parramore Garden, for instance, Monroe watched the transformation of Gordon Brown, now 17 years old. "He started with us at the beginning: digging. He didn't eat vegetables or know the importance of them. Now, Gordon loves vegetables and is eating salads. His grades have improved. He loves helping others. As matter of fact, he's earned the nickname 'Cabbage Boy,' and he raps about vegetables in the garden."

As part of their \$150,000 worth of grants for community gardens, Winter Park Health Foundation recently helped fund gardens related to four schools and two nursing homes, along with a demonstration garden at Mead Garden for aspiring community garden leaders.

Get Involved or Start Your Own

For those with seeds of inspiration and roots of strong leadership, Central Florida is stocked with tools for starting community gardens. The vital elements—according to community garden experts—are the support of key, interested parties; a strong leader or two; and a knowledgeable garden advisor. Add to that foundation an ongoing dedication of time and patience. The rewards are, as well-stated by Orange County Commissioner Bill Segal, "measurable health benefits and immeasurable benefits to the soul. You never meet an unhappy gardener."

Endnotes: For purposes of this article, a community garden is any piece of land gardened by a group of people. Existing community gardens fill up quickly and usually have ongoing waiting lists. City or county governments or other organizations can be helpful but aren't necessary for start-up gardens. Search for grants online. Any piece of land under your control can be converted and gardened by any group of people. Open your eyes to the fertile land around you. It can feed you and others.

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