

# Community garden will have significant benefits

**W**hat is a community garden? The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences describes a community garden as a collaborative greenspace in which the participants share in both the maintenance and the rewards. It can grow veggies or flowers. It can be at a variety of sites including neighborhoods, schools, churches, and virtually any location willing to host a garden on an otherwise-vacant piece of property. It can be a single community plot or a series of individual plots. While flowers can be grown at a community garden, it is not a botanical garden. Many of our part-time residents spend their summer months in locales where community gardens have been in place for decades. Counties to the north and south of us have established community gardens. It is a concept whose time has come for Charlotte County.

The American Community Gardening Association states



Nancy Prafke

many benefits of community gardens. These include providing a catalyst for neighborhood and community development; beautifying neighborhoods; stimulating social interaction; encouraging self-reliance; producing nutritious food; reducing family food budgets; conserving resources; creating opportunity for recreation, exercise, therapy, and education; reducing crime; preserving green space; and providing opportunities for intergenerational and cross-cultural connections. IFAS adds it's also an opportunity to reduce stress and have fun!

This concept is not new to our county. Three years ago Macedonia Human Services Cultural Training Center, Inc. proposed establishing a community garden in

Punta Gorda. The Punta Gorda Beautification Committee endorsed the initiative. Despite the extraordinary merits of the recommendation, public funds were not available to bring this project to fruition. Charlotte County Extension Service's Horticulture program has been supportive of the development of community gardens.

Today, a collaborative effort of many organizations is working to bring the first community garden to Charlotte County. Team Punta Gorda, Charlotte County Extension Services Master Gardeners, the City of Punta Gorda, and Charlotte County Community Services have all begun the planning process. Bernice A. Russell Community Development Corporation, Charlotte County Health Department, New Operation Cooper Street, Punta Gorda Housing Authority, Punta Gorda Police

Department, Saint Mary Primitive Baptist Church, Trabue Woods Economic Development Corporation, and Worden Farms have also joined the project through participation and/or endorsement.

Plans are under way to begin the first community garden at the South County Regional Park. Our goal is to have the garden open during the next planting season. We anticipate having 20-40 plots available to families and groups for a nominal annual fee. Seminars will be offered to prepare residents to be successful gardeners. Additional educational opportunities include nutrition education, healthy and creative food preparation, foods from other cultures, and food preservation. If you are interested in having your own plot, please contact Team Punta Gorda at 941-637-8326 or [team@teampuntagorda.org](mailto:team@teampuntagorda.org).

The collaborative

committee is seeking contributions to help fund this important project. If you would like further information on how you can provide resources to start Charlotte County's first community garden, please contact Team Punta Gorda. Your donation of materials or funds is tax-deductible.

Long term, we envision many more community gardens "sprouting up" around the county. We'll leverage our first experience to space available on city, county, or other organizations' properties. An Association of Charlotte County Community Gardens could become a reality. Produce grown from a community garden could be offered at a local farmer's market. Homeless shelters could receive food grown in our own community gardens. The possibilities are endless.

Don't forget to purchase the beautiful,

new coffee-table book "Destination Punta Gorda: Pride of the People" featuring Charlotte County from Team Punta Gorda. It's an illustrated tribute to the people who make Charlotte County a wonderful place to live, work, and play. Visit us at the Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce and get a copy now. Team is honored to have been selected as the Punta Gorda Chamber of Commerce 2009 Non-Profit Business of the Year.

*Nancy Prafke is CEO of Team Punta Gorda. Readers may reach her at [team@teampuntagorda.org](mailto:team@teampuntagorda.org).*