

A community garden is coming to a park near you

When it comes to getting a community project done, TEAM Punta Gorda has no peer.

Its members, dedicated to community improvement, raise money and turn out in droves to complete landscaping projects, right of way and park beautification, pave walkways, promote bicycling or even create a city master plan.

So when the City Council wanted to explore the idea of a community garden a couple of years ago, it went to TEAM, its go-to organization. This time, it responded not only with its own members but by reaching out to other organizations and making the garden a true community project.

"They (City Council) basically came to us and said, 'Can you help us out?'" said Heleen Schouten, who became the TEAM garden committee chair. "They offered us several lots in town that might be of interest for starting a garden, but had no money."

While the committee was in the process of examining suitable sites, the staff at Charlotte County Community Services' South County Regional Park heard about the project and thought, "Why not here?"

Lacey Miranda, the park's recreation coordinator, said, "We got the idea a year and a half ago at a workshop. Janiece Strande (park recreation specialist) actually came up with it. We thought it could become a place for people to come and have a sense of pride and involvement in the community they live in."

It turned out to be an excellent partnership.

TEAM provided volunteers to build the beds, raised money, including a \$1,000 contribution from the Punta Gorda Garden Club, a \$4,000 grant from the Charlotte Community Foundation for



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handicapped access to a bed and other donations, and elicited support from partners, like the Charlotte County Extension Service, Master Gardeners, the Charlotte County Health Department, Bernice A. Russell Community Development Corporation, New Operation Cooper Street, Punta Gorda Housing Authority and the Punta Gorda Police Department, St. Mary Primitive Baptist Church, Trabue Woods Economic Development Corporation and Worden Farms.

Charlotte County Community Services and South County Regional Park provided the land, a fenced-in, locked, well-lit location and will have tools and irrigation available to the gardeners.

Construction on the raised beds was finished three weeks ahead of schedule despite rainy weather, and the topsoil went in Sept. 15-16. All that's needed now is gardeners, and Miranda has no doubt her 20 20-foot beds will go quickly.

"I think we'll have no problem filling the beds in the first year," she said. "We have a list for more than half the garden space now, mostly with people who want to raise produce. It's open to everybody on a first-come, first-served basis. People will have access to the garden during the regular hours we are open."

Rent for a year is \$10 for a 10-foot half bed and \$20 for a full 20-foot bed. For potential gardeners out there worried



HERALD PHOTO BY GORDON BOWER

From left, volunteer Robert Mitchell; community garden committee member and Master Gardener Mike Stevens; TEAM member Steve Johnson; Lacey Miranda, park recreation coordinator; Janiece Strande, park recreation specialist; Heleen Schouten, TEAM garden committee chairman; and Joyce Tilden, garden committee member and Master Gardener, take time out from a rainy work day to pose for a photo at the sign heralding the arrival of the community garden project.

about whether the savings on food costs are worth the labor, Miranda has some good advice.

"It's a great deal for people," she said. "Twenty dollars is less than they would spend in a month for produce at the grocery store. The Extension Service is also providing expert advice from Master Gardeners to help ensure good crop yields, and all participants will have to take a best practices class. Pesticides are a necessity in our buggy climate but only those approved by the Master Gardeners and permitted by county law."

Miranda said her staff's research has shown that theft isn't a big problem in community gardens. This one is fenced, locked and well lit, plus there will be a basket of vegetables with a take-one-free

sign to deter the lazy.

Miranda is pleased with the project so far.

"It's definitely been well received," she said. "I'd like to do it a couple of years here and then do it throughout the county."

The garden will be open for business by the start of November, when the growing season around here starts. Interested gardeners can stop by the park, 670 Cooper St., anytime during regular business hours to check out the beds. Just look for the South County Regional Garden sign on the fence next to the main park building.

Call 941-505-8686 for more information or to inquire about renting a bed. You can also visit <http://charlottecountvfl.com/CommunityServices/ParkPages/SCRPGarden>.