

**BLUE TIP:** (Sardinian) shepherds who wandered the island's highlands, moving livestock from the mountains to the plains, were up to 10 times more likely to live to 100 than men in the rest of Italy. — “The Blue Zones Solutions” by Dan Buettner

# HOSPITAL GARDEN HELPS CANCER PATIENTS RECOVER

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The garden Bob Weiss helped plant at a local hospital where he once received cancer treatment is thriving.

It's been nine years since he finished 12 cycles of chemotherapy at NCH North Naples Hospital, where he looked out the window into a courtyard and a neglected garden of dead plants.

Weiss, 52, who was being treated for stage 4 Hodgkin lymphoma, knew it didn't have to be that way.

He got together with the infusion administer, and they pursued starting a new garden, which is located today in a courtyard of the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging & Rehabilitation.

“We got permission to plant in one-third of the garden,” he said.

That was in February 2009, and Weiss teamed up with Scot Weakas, the head groundskeeper at the hospital, to plant vegetables and fruit trees.

One day, Dr. Allen Weiss, NCH's chief executive officer, came by and asked why they hadn't replanted the entire area. The two men have the same last name but are not related. That's when Bob Weiss and Weakas got the OK to revitalize the entire garden that borders a paved area for patients and family.

The garden's bounty consists of tomatoes, peppers, kale, cabbage, sweet potatoes, onions and other vegetables. There also are lemon and lime trees and a massive avocado tree.

The fruits and vegetables are distributed to members of a cancer support group Bob Weiss belongs to that meets every Tuesday afternoon. There could be anywhere from a handful to 15 people who come each week, he said.

“It just depends on what's going on in their lives,” Weiss said.

Part of the garden program is educating the cancer survivors about the health benefits of the fruits and vegetables, said Weiss, who is a supporter of The Blue Zones Project initiative underway in Southwest Florida.

The Blue Zones is a wellness and longevity campaign where businesses, government agencies, restaurants, grocery stores, churches, residential communities and other groups incorporate healthier options in daily practices so its audience base can make better choices.

The philosophy is that over time, healthier



Bob Weiss, a cancer survivor, checks out avocados on a tree that he and others planted years ago in the courtyard on the campus of NCH North Naples Hospital.

LIZ FREEMAN/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

choices will become the easier choice, and each incremental step can improve health and well-being. Offering fresh fruit and bottled water instead of soft drinks and candy bars in employee breakrooms is one example.

Eating a plant-saint diet is an integral part of the program. Growing a garden of vegetables and fruits is among projects that schools and employers are doing, including the aspect of helping people bonds with one another.

Southwest Florida is one of 37 communities nationwide that is either working toward recognition as a Blue Zones community or has achieved it by widespread adoption of the underlying principles.

The Blue Zones Project was introduced to the region in 2015 based on the world travels of Dan Buettner, who identified communities worldwide where people share lifestyle traits and live

to 100 or older. He wrote a New York Times best-seller about the nine principles of longevity.

Deanna Strausbaugh, a social worker at the hospital who helps run the cancer support group, said the attendees enjoy the fruits and vegetables.

“It's basically a great learning experience,” she said. “It started a whole interest about learning about organic vegetables.”

What helps the garden thrive is the sole use of organic water and fertilizer, and no chemicals, Bob Weiss said. Weakas' wife, Trina Weakas, a volunteer at the hospital, also cares for the garden.

“We do all organic stuff so it is all natural,” Weiss said. “The avocado tree has been here in the garden for seven years. We save people \$1 with each avocado.”