

‘The glory of gardening: hands in the dirt, head in the sun, heart with nature. To nurture a garden is to feed not just the body, but the soul.’ — Alfred Austin



Volunteers from Publix unload mulch in April 2017, working with representatives from the Blue Zones Project and Collier County Parks and Recreation Department to rejuvenate the Community Garden at the Golden Gate Community Center.
LANCE SHEARER/SPECIAL TO THE NAPLES DAILY NEWS



Britt Patterson-Web
Guest columnist

Collier Greens supports health benefits of school, community garden

Reaping the benefits of garden doesn't occur solely when a plant reached maturity or its fruit is ripe picking. Rather, it's a continual process, and one that yields advantage galore.

First, there's healthier eat Those with backyard vegetable gardens and fruiting trees will likely you that the produce they have grown themselves just tastes better than what they can buy at the store. And the flip side, they'll often opt to cultivate their favorite go-to staples.

Throughout the entire process of nurturing plants from seedling to adulthood, those who garden enjoy elevated moods, decreased dementia risk, even social connectedness as they work together with others on a common cause.

The bond with nature, too, can't be discounted. It's why studies point to an association between longevity and lush, green environs.

These are just some of the reasons for the popularity of school and community gardens cropping up nationwide. In the classroom setting, gardens give school kids a chance to work outside and, in the process, acquire healthy eating habits and improve academic performance.

It's something that Naples Botanical Garden — one of 41 South Florida Blue Zones Project-approved worksites — is well aware of with Collier Greens program, which supports school and community gardens.

Collier Greens assists with garden development, fostering dialogue among school garden professionals, and providing technical garden support. The goal is not to maintain these gardens ourselves, but rather to provide

Celebrate National Gardening Day in peace and beauty of nature

Kate Hampton
Blue Zones Project - SWFL

Gertrude Jekyll once wrote that “the love of gardening is a seed once sown that never dies.”

As a British horticulturist who created more than 400 gardens in the UK, Europe and the U.S., she ought to know.

There is something almost magical about gardening. It's more than just the peaceful time you spend working with your own two hands. It's more than just the feeling of the warm sun on your back and the calming sounds of nature buzzing in your ear.

Maybe it's about creating something that takes time to curate; it's not the instant gratification that we've all grown accustomed to. Maybe it differs from person to person — almost like speaking a secret language that only you can understand.

Whatever the reason, gardening has been a beloved pastime for centuries. With National Gardening Day coming up on April 14, Blue Zones Project encourages gardening due to the vast health benefits associated with the hobby.

Gardening has been shown to reduce stress by lowering cortisol levels in your

body, boosting your immune system, increasing dexterity in your hands as you age and improving your mental health. People who garden are also engaging in moderate-intensity exercise and are more likely to eat a healthier diet. All those herbs, fruits and vegetables you're planting have to go somewhere, so why not on your plate!

In addition to private gardens, the popularity of community gardens continues to grow. Some communities allow the use of these plots for free, but others, like the Golden Gate Communi-

See GARDENING, Page 9D

See COLLIER GREENS, Page 9D

Gardening

Continued from Page 6D

ty Garden, have a small annual fee that allows you to have a personal plot within the garden.

Community gardens can reduce isolation and allow visitors to connect with others who share common interests, and they increase healthy food access in food deserts.

Poor nutrition and obesity are both challenges in low-income neighborhoods. Low accessibility to nutritious foods can cause health problems to residents in food deserts. The addition of gardens to these areas may improve nutrition and increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables.

In addition to community gardens, Blue Zones Project works with schools, faith-based organizations, homeowners associations and businesses to encourage gardening as a healthy best practice.

Lake Trafford Elementary, Tommie Barfield Elementary, Bonita Springs Charter School, Lely Elementary, Sea Gate Elementary and Lake Park Elementary added gardens on their campuses and use them as a teaching tool to educate students about planting and growing herbs and vegetables.

Cornerstone United Methodist Church in North Naples maintains a volunteer-run garden on its property, and they distribute the fresh, harvested food free to the community. Countryside Country Club in East Naples built beautiful raised-bed gardens, while the residents at The Arlington in East Naples have large plant-



Volunteer 'Garden Mom' Melissa Rocchio discusses plants with fifth grader Jake Waltbillig, 11, in the garden at Naples' Sea Gate Elementary School on April 27, 2016, after the ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the school being Blue Zones- approved.

GREGG PACHKOWSKI/SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

ers throughout the community to plant herbs, flowers and vegetables.

If you've never given gardening a chance, visit bhg.com/gardening/how-to-garden for great information on how to get started. You never know what you might create. As Claude Monet said of his garden, "It's my most beautiful masterpiece."

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