



**Britt Patterson-Weber**  
Guest columnist

## Collier Greens supports health benefits of school, community gardens

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

First, there's healthier eating. Those with backyard vegetable gardens and fruiting trees will likely tell you that the produce they have grown themselves just tastes better than what they can buy at the store. And, on 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, adopt healthy eating habits and improve academic performance.

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

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

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# Collier greens

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ganizations or individuals with the tools they need to do so.

Due to the work that Collier Greens does, it was a natural fit in spring 2017 when Golden Gate Community Garden was getting a much-needed overhaul from Collier County with the help of Blue Zones Project. Collier Greens furnished sweet potato slips, the Collier Greens garden manual and were available to answer questions. Collier Greens served as one of several groups to pool resources to make the Golden Gate garden a reality. Because Collier Greens empowers garden organizers, each garden has the freedom to take its own unique shape and purpose.

What started with one workshop and a manual in

2011 has grown to reach thousands of individuals in the county and beyond. There are now more than 50 organizations that participate in the Collier Greens Program. The work doesn't stop there. Each year we continue to refine our manual, which includes essentials such as a growing calendar, irrigation and pest management tips, and instructions for closing down gardens for the summer.

News of Collier Greens' success is spreading globally. In 2018, Naples Botanical Garden was selected to present at the Botanic Gardens Conservation International 10th Annual Congress on Education in Botanic Gardens in Warsaw, Poland.

As school and community gardens continue to grow throughout Southwest Florida, Collier Greens is available to help impact the health of our community. And who doesn't love that?

*Britt Patterson-Weber is director of Education & Visitor Experience at Naples Botanical Garden.*