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NNB News : 2012 : 02 : 27 : Neighborhood gardens inspire healthy eating

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Neighborhood gardens inspire healthy eating

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Vanessa Lacava and Jason Beck water vegetables and work on the drip irrigation system at the Bartlett Park Community Garden.

By Nicole Martinez
Neighborhood News Bureau

On an unseasonably hot February afternoon, Vanessa Lacava watered a dirt trough that will soon yield a plentiful bounty of onions. Surrounding her were garden beds filled with ripe collard greens, mustard greens, tomatoes and chard. A few yards away, the mid-day traffic on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Street zipped by.

Bartlett Park Community Garden, located at 1443 Highland St. S, joins more than 10 other community gardens established in St. Petersburg. These little green oases' are appearing in private and city-owned lots, churches and even schoolyards. It is part of a burgeoning national food movement that emphasizes self-sufficiency, alternate healthy food systems and community

engagement.

"I think it's sad as humans we are losing that knowledge of how to provide for ourselves," said Lacava, who has been volunteering at the Bartlett Park garden for about three weeks. "I want to do as much for myself as I can."

Faith House, a place for substance abuse recovery, is a couple miles north of Bartlett. Resting on a half-acre of land adjacent to Faith at 302 15th St. N is its fresh garden, Guia, which has been producing food for program residents for more than a year. Bill Bilodeau has been a volunteer at Guia Garden from the start.

"There is psychic nourishment that takes place as well as physical nourishment," said Bilodeau, about eating locally-grown organic food.

Faith House has a noticeable effect on the residents. The vice president of the house once wrote in a letter that there is a "new spirit" at Faith, Bilodeau said.

The supporters of this urban agriculture community come together bringing their vision of a greener St. Petersburg to life. The group has been meeting regularly at the Chamber of Commerce to develop strategies to cultivate a network between community gardens, local organizations and resources. The group tentatively formed under the name Sustainable Urban Agriculture.

Sharon Joy Kleitsch, community consultant and member of the urban agricultural group said, "You can just feel the energy and the passion."

Kleitsch said, born in part from a series of meetings last September, the initial funding for the group came from a proposal of the Florida Public Services Union to use 211 plots of city owned land for urban gardening. The city initially rejected the proposal, due to concerns over insurance and city code. At a community gardening panel

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meeting a few weeks later at Studio@620, it was announced that the city code had changed, relaxing concerns about insurance liabilities. This green light piqued the interest of the Green Council at the Chamber of Commerce and the Sustainable Urban Agriculture group held its first meeting there in October.

Today the group's email list boasts more than 50 people. New faces routinely pop-up at meetings, says Jillian Husk, chamber liaison. She said the group is expecting a \$30,000 grant from the Bon Secours foundation later this month.

The grant will provide funding to hire a year-long project manager and two graduate assistants to assess and catalog existing gardens, materials and potential garden sites. This inventory will be available to the public through an online database in conjunction with Green Florida. Green Florida is a statewide urban gardening non-profit that also started the Bartlett Garden.

Kleitsch said this is an exciting time for the agricultural group. Meetings reflect a collective nature; ideas are bounced between professionals in various fields – experienced agriculturalist and enthusiastic amateurs.

The project manager will design a blueprint on how to develop a sustainable agricultural infrastructure in St. Petersburg.

In addition to the grant, the group is working on a pilot program called "10,000 Good Greens." The Urban Agricultural group plan to pair with schools, churches and other neighborhood organizations to provide free young plants, soil and assistance for starter community gardens. The program is aimed at starting more community gardens throughout the south side of St. Petersburg so that residents will have access to affordable organic local produce.

Neighborhood News Bureau (NNB) is a working newsroom, staffed by USF St. Petersburg undergraduate and graduate journalism students. NNB serves Midtown and surrounding communities. To report your community news, call 727-873-4741, or email lclevela@mail.usf.edu. Online at nnbnews.com

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