

Growing Together

A VFW Post in Florida uses gardening for therapeutic purposes and camaraderie

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With an abundance of new treatments for PTSD these days, members of VFW Post 2811 in Gainesville, Florida, planted their own with help from a local gardening group this year.

Though gardening therapy has cast ripples in the treatment for PTSD, Post 2811 Surgeon General Avery Owen and former Post 2811 Quartermaster Paul Deis faced a predicament when they first set out to get members of the Post involved in January.

“We were sitting in Deis’ office and discussing gardening therapy and how community gardens were not necessarily a good fit for veterans who carry the burden of PTSD,” said Owen, who retired from the Florida Army National Guard after more than 30 years in the service.

Owen, who served 24 years on active duty and retired as a master sergeant with the 3rd Bn, 20th Special Forces Group of the Florida Army National Guard, preferred a tailor-made garden for veterans, welcoming of all the aspects a Post provides to those seeking camaraderie.

“The idea of a teaching garden was what we wanted,” Owen said. “It demonstrated various methods, and it served as a living static display that could be used as a focal point for veterans to meet and share more than just gardening tips.”

Through word of mouth, Owen and Deis received a phone call later in the month that provided the opportunity they had been looking forward to seizing.

“It was Judith [Bellaire] from a local homesteading group called Grow Gainesville,” Owen said. “She was looking for a place for their monthly meetings as they had lost a past meeting place due to COVID.”

In a quid pro quo, Owen and Deis agreed to host Grow Gainesville, a local group of avid gardeners dedicated to food production, in return for their help in creating a teaching

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garden for veterans.

Members of Post 2811 and Grow Gainesville have since worked in symbiosis.

Following the construction of the teaching garden at Post 2811 in early February, the eight-month collaboration has led to veterans learning an array of methods for growing vegetables. Some of these methods include lessons in foot gardening, herb spiral, a keyhole garden, as well as several types of container gardening techniques.

“Our mission is to reacquaint ourselves with the skills involved in growing some of your own food,” said Tom Wootton of Grow Gainesville.

With most of the supplies and equipment also being donated by VFW and Grow Gainesville members, the group’s work at what is called a “victory garden” also is a longstanding tradition rooted in the unity between civilians and military soldiers.

The “victory gardens,” or home vegetable gardens, sprouted out of necessity during World War I and II, an effort by the National War Garden Commission to promote growing one’s own crops to free up crops for troops fighting in a foreign land.

At the Post 2811 teaching garden, veterans and Grow Gainesville members also have installed large insect and pollinator beds at each end of the garden, as well as began planting a wide variety of vegetables and fruits.

Though the results are still growing from their roots, the therapeutic effects of gardening and a safe space for camaraderie amongst both factions is exactly what Owen and Deis had planned.

“Gainesville is a college town and sometimes the military is not viewed in a positive light,” Owen said. “The meetings have had the positive effect of us meeting on common ground, finding those shared interests, and breaking down stereotypes on both sides. This is also a goal of the teaching garden, that integration back into society.”

Owen also added that the teaching garden’s positive impact has stirred others into action. Since being created, the Post has had several guests appear to take in the environment and help add to it.

“The teaching garden is newly constructed, but interest is quickly building,” Owen said. “Local recreational therapists from the Department of Veteran Affairs are interested and have even helped in the construction. The potential of this project is fantastic and hopefully will serve as a template for other VFW Posts.”