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Nature Coast Florida Master Gardeners complete Back the Blue Project

Story and Photos

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TRENTON -- A lot of you have been wondering about it. What the heck is going on over at the Gilchrist Sheriff's Office?

Here's what's happening and why it's happening. I heard that the landscaping at GCSO was in pretty rough condition. After observing first-hand, the barren, weed-laden gardens, the parched soil, and the dead plants in broken planters, I had an idea followed by a vision of what to do about this sad situation.

Consequently, a hard-working group of us Nature Coast Florida Master Gardeners quickly headed toward the common goal of beautifying the landscape to give it a delightful, welcoming ambience and to encourage Gilchrist peacekeepers with tangible appreciation for all they do.



Florida Master Gardeners are trained by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Their knowledge and activities are this land grant university at work -- connecting research to local communities, specifically here bringing applied research to the Tri-County Area of Levy, Dixie and Gilchrist counties, and to the Gilchrist County Sheriff's Office.

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If we were bakers, perhaps a monthly delivery of delicious pastries and cakes would show our appreciation of law enforcement, but fortunately - or maybe unfortunately depending on your particular appetite - we are “plant-a-holic” gardeners, and planting flowers is what we do. So, we specified our goal:

- To beautify the landscape
- To show appreciation for law enforcement
- To provide a “Florida Friendly Landscape”



To give back to the community and make people aware of the Florida Master Gardener program and what it can do for your community

And we went to work. We started with an assessment of the project—measuring, coming up with a design plan and a cost benefit analysis of what supplies we would need and what the total cost would be. We had a commitment from six Nature Coast Master Gardeners to volunteer with their areas of expertise for the manual labor of trimming, tilling, preparing the soil, adding organic soil amendment (manure), planting, mulching, and potting flowers. Incidentally, the average age of the volunteers for the project, including two husbands for irrigation installation, is 68 years old, not counting one teenager for additional muscle.

To realize this project, Master Gardeners had no money, no stipend, no budget, and

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no grants. None of us were independently wealthy to fund the project, so we decided that if other people deemed the project as worthy as we did, we could ask for donations from the community and see what happened. If all else failed, we could do a scaled down version of our vision by planting wild flowers or robbing our own gardens to create at least a “57 Variety Heinz” style garden.



We used a flyer I created for explaining our mission and objectives, put our big girl pants on, and made cold calls on local businesses, people we knew in the community, friends, and neighbors and asked for support in any way possible for plants, supplies, or monetary donations. And we finally dubbed our project “BACK THE BLUE.”

We elicited the help of HardisonInk.com and the Gilchrist County Journal to assist us with getting the word out. Both were very gracious and generous, and because of the exposure we received from their notices, we were contacted by entities we never would have thought of approaching who were willing to support our work.

There was a heartwarming response to our plea for help from individuals, businesses, entities, and grassroots organizations by way of tangible donations and private funding and supplying. We are happy to say that we raised exactly what we needed to bring the envisioned project to completion without skimping.

To reiterate and be completely clear:

The Gilchrist County Sheriff’s Office landscaping project was 100 percent funded by community donations!

100 percent of all the supplies provided was donated.

100 percent of all the services provided was from volunteers.

100 percent of all deliveries was from volunteers in their private vehicles.

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100 percent of design, planning, and installment was provided by volunteers.
100 percent of advertising was provided by local communications businesses.
100 percent of the cost of the specialty planter created from a Crown Victoria detective's car trunk was donated by Gilchrist County Recycling.

We Master Gardeners pride ourselves on frugality, efficiency, recycling, and repurposing in order to be good stewards of the environment AND, in this case, of the generous donations we received. We acquired organic manure as opposed to costlier processed and packaged Black Kow compost. We purchased stone, soil, and mulch in bulk, beyond that which was donated, in order to stretch our funds. We repurposed old planter pots, beyond new ones donated, by spray painting and patching. We used donated flowers for augmentation and even propagated hundreds of new plants from tubers of rescued plants on site.

And, of course, we bought sale priced plants and stole others from our personal landscapes.

We chose drought-tolerant, easy maintenance, disease-resistant plants to place the "Right Plant in the Right Place" for a "Florida Friendly Landscape." We want this GCSO landscape to endure.

We were able to install a micro-irrigation system in the Heritage Rose Garden part of the project. A retired citrus grower donated the system. We have plans to install another irrigation system in the front garden when it is completed.

Everyone is talking about the specialty planter, made from the trunk of a detective's car, anchoring the front garden. It is the creation of Dan Beyer from Gilchrist Recycling. Truly the focal point of the entire front garden, this car is our exciting original Picasso. Planting around it still needs tweaking and finishing touches, but it's a fun and exciting piece of our work.

The core group of Nature Coast Master Gardeners (Gilchrist, Levy and Dixie counties) carrying out all the tasks for this project are Sue Stockman, Linda Rees Gurney, Melissa Mauer, Susan Harris, Mary Tracy, and, yours truly, Christine Hentschel.

We were all able to apply and disseminate the research from UF's IFAS—what we learned in the classroom—to the project. We also know that what we learned from this project will be applicable to future projects we will involve ourselves in. Without the generosity of the core group, their endurance in the summer's hot and humid weather, and their tenacity to getting a job done and doing it well, this endeavor would never have been possible.

Hats off to this group of women Master Gardeners! And hats off to the Gilchrist County Sheriff's Office personnel who richly deserve the fruits of this achievement!

Assignment Complete, or "10-98," in "Tens Code" lingo.

(Although 10-98 also means "prison break" for some agencies, it mostly is understood as "Assignment Complete.")