

Homegrown solutions: Experts say to consider the hidden cost of food

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REPORT — Keeping it local was the theme of the day recently for more than 100 gardeners, educators, elected officials and environmentalists, who spent the day learning about the benefits of locally-grown food at the 5th annual Environmental Forum.

The theme this year was "Growing Locally with Community Gardens." It was the first forum ever to draw such a large number of people, and the first at which attendees were served locally grown food and pastries.

It also was the first ever held north of the bay.

Appropriately enough, the event was held at the Bopkita Center, a nine-acre educational facility that lies within the 43,000-acre Nokuse Plantation in Freeport. The center opened in September with the goal of instilling in children a love of the environment and animals by teaching them about the importance of biodiversity and conservation.

"If these kids who come here learn only one thing, it should be that we are just one part of an entire web of life, and that we can't segregate or discriminate our species at the expense of all the others," M.C. Davis, who co-owns Nokuse Plantation, said during the opening remarks.

Commissioner Cecil Jones spoke about the county's efforts to preserve the environment and wildlife through initiatives such as the Leave No Trace ordinance and the Wildlife Conservation Plan, which is still being developed.

"You can't just think that kids are going to grow up loving the environment," she said. "You have to facilitate that love ... I want to pass on (to the next generation) the love that we have for our animals. You can't take it for granted that they're always going to be here."

If the desire to create a community garden takes root and grows, she said she would diligently work to find a place to make it happen.

Eric Draper, deputy director and policy director of Audubon of Florida, spoke at length about the benefits of community gardens, saying that they are much more than just piec-



SUN ARCHIVE PHOTO

M.C. Davis is the brains behind the Nokuse Plantation, a 48,000-acre nature preserve in Freeport.

es of land that are collectively gardened by a group of people.

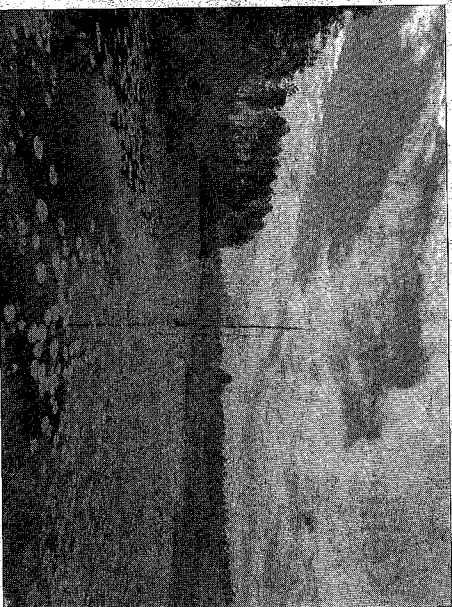
"When you start taking responsibility for what's going on in your back yard and what's down the street, you start taking responsibility for what's going on in your community," he said.

"When you feel this sudden responsibility and ownership for that, then you're also going to say, 'I'm responsible for that 10 miles of the shoreline,' or 'I'm responsible for that decision in the legislature ...'"

He spoke about the transportation and pollution that results when food is hauled thousands of miles from where it is grown — or slaughtered — to its final destination. He encouraged everyone to join efforts to fight pending legislation in Tallahassee that would open Florida's shoreline to oil exploration and drilling.

Afterward, the attendees sat in on a variety of workshops that covered topics such as learning to identify which insects beneficial or harmful to their gardens, different styles of organic gardening, garden design, and which plants are best suited for Northwest Florida.

Eddie Powell, the county's horticulture extension agent, talked about how to create rain barrels to harvest rainwater for gardens and lawns, while Peter Horn demonstrated how to create a compact herb garden by arranging bricks into a spiral pattern, then filling it in with soil and shredded paper, which



The Nokuse Plantation was the recent setting for a forum on "Growing Locally with Community Gardens."

helps to retain water." Draper said he wanted people to make eating a more conscious and deliberate activity.

That way, he said, "when you're making a decision about food, you're making a decision about what went on in producing the food, what it's going to do to your body, and what it's going to do to your personal waste stream." If you produce something that you grow from a seed in your back yard, then the impact on costs that's built into that steak.

If you eat a steak from the Midwest, then you have a huge amount of transportation and pollution costs that's built into that steak.