

## **Edible Community Gardens Created on Pine Avenue**

Eating locally grown produce has taken on a whole new meaning on Pine Avenue in Anna Maria. Landscape designer and native habitat expert, Michael Miller, along with Pine Avenue Restoration developers Ed Chiles and Micheal Coleman, have partnered with Pine Avenue Merchants to design and implement Edible Community Gardens on Pine Avenue, now known as "The Greenest Little Main Street in America". The concept of food along the historic stretch between the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay, was posed about a year ago and is now a reality with eight raised beds and more to follow. These gardens contain a unique sheet mulch system developed through the Permaculture movement. Permaculture is a branch of [ecological design](#), [ecological engineering](#), and [environmental design](#) that develops [sustainable architecture](#) and self-maintained [agricultural](#) systems modeled from natural [ecosystems](#). The mulch system used in the Pine Avenue gardens is a layering of materials in such a way as to create the ideal soil medium for growing all types of vegetables even those that are typically difficult to grow in the summer. The organic vegetables in the Pine Avenue gardens are not only growing but are thriving beyond initial expectations. Anyone who has ever tried to grow vegetable in the heat of a Florida summer knows how literally fruitless it can be. According to Miller, "It is virtually impossible to grow conventional vegetables in the summer outside of a greenhouse. Some traditional vegetables are growing well in these gardens and we have also incorporated other unique vegetables that are grown in the tropics".

The Merchants Community Gardens Project began as an initiative of the Pine Avenue Merchants Association. Members felt it would further enhance the "community" aspect of their efforts. However, with land at a premium a "non-traditional" solution was needed. This is when Ed Chiles suggested "food boxes". Chiles, owner of the Sandbar, Beachhouse and Mar Vista restaurants, is a heritage product advocate who has successfully incorporated many locally grown and harvested products into the menu mix at his three restaurants. Once the merchants adopted Chiles' suggestion, Miller sought to make the vision a reality. According to Miller, "The main obstacle we faced was how to give the image of abundance when we can't get vegetables to grow in the intense heat".

Resorting to the resource most of us use when we need to find information, Miller googled 'Summer Vegetables Florida' and at the top of the page was a link for ECHO which stands for Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization. ECHO is a Christian, non-denominational organization based in North Ft. Myers, Florida that grows tropical vegetables, sends the seeds to other groups in third-world countries, who distribute the seed and teach people there how to grow and propagate the resulting produce.

Miller immediately contacted the community garden intern at ECHO to discuss how they could work together to establish successful Edible Community Gardens on Pine Avenue. He discovered that the vegetables ECHO was growing were not your usual garden variety vegetables. Not only do these unique vegetables thrive in the tropical, summer heat but some, such as, Moringa, Edible Hibiscus and Chinese Spinach, are among the most nutritious plants on earth. After touring the facility, Miller realized that the project was possible and the vegetables ECHO was growing were exactly what they needed for Pine Avenue.

Some of the organic vegetables one will see in these community organic gardens may not be familiar but that is part of the uniqueness of this project and what makes it exciting. Coleman explains, "We are using vegetables that are grown in the tropics. They can take the heat and they are delicious and super nutritious. My wife puts them in green smoothies and salads every day." Another unique aspect of this project is the accessibility of information at the consumer's fingertips. Each box has a QR code and an information placard on the box. Scanning the QR code will direct people to a website, [www.perfectisland.us/Edibles.html](http://www.perfectisland.us/Edibles.html) where they can learn about the project, the individual vegetables in that particular garden and even view recipes that they can make using those vegetables.

According to Miller, "The organic vegetables that are growing in the eight established gardens are just the start of something that we think is going to really take off. Not only do we already have commitments from other island businesses for additional gardens but some local residents have requested to learn how they can have one of these gardens in their own yards." According to Miller the box is not necessary to grow these vegetables. It is more about the sheet mulch contents. Sheet mulch is a layering of items starting with a base of recycled newspaper, cardboard or even old clothes, topped with repetitive layers combining seedless hay, bulk compost, and a variety of composted manure, bone meal, soil acidifier, green sand and chemical free green yard clippings.

Chiles states, "This project directly supports the mission of supporting our local economy and efforts toward becoming more self-sustaining. The Locavore movement is reshaping the way consumers shop for and consume food. They want to know the origin on their food. This movement is rooted in economics and culture."

Restaurants, like the Chiles Group, along with food distributors, suppliers and even the big box stores are recognizing this demand and restructuring their business models and brand messaging to meet their customer's desires. Coleman states, "Since this project supports our mission of being green and sustainable in practical, measurable and repeatable ways, it makes economic and environmental sense." He continues, "When you grow food locally you cut down on the cost of transporting it and the effect that long-haul transportation has on our economy and environment. At the same time, you reduce trips off island and mitigate local traffic. This is the local, personal component of what is becoming a worldwide 'transition' movement whereby local communities take hold of their own economic, ecological and cultural destinies.

This movement supports the small business, local farmer or fisherman, in short, friends and neighbors who, in turn, put that 'captured revenue' back into that same community. Going local helps keep the money here recirculating it through our local economy."

What little maintenance is required for the gardens is shared between the merchants and the Pine Avenue Restoration partnership. Each garden container is sponsored by one of the small business owners who have set up shop on Pine Avenue. The first boxes were quickly sponsored by Shinyfish Emporium, Poppo's Taqueria, Emerson's Humor and Art, The Flip Flop Shop, Anna Maria Olive Oil Outpost, The Spice Merchants, Anna Maria Island Accommodations and Stir It Up Yogurt Shack. They pay for the products and make sure the gardens are maintained. According to several of the merchants, they have been amazed at how abundantly the plants have grown in such a short time.

According to Miller, Chiles and Coleman, the long range goal of this project is to have these Edible Community Gardens not only on Pine Avenue but all over the island and beyond. Miller explains, "This is not about having a substitute source of produce as much as it is about lifestyle enhancement. This is about the joy of creating an abundant garden right in one's own backyard or community."

Recently, Miller harvested enough Malabar Spinach from his own garden and made an Indian Raita (yogurt salad) to feed 40 people at a pot luck picnic for the local chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society. When one speaks to Mike Miller, it is obvious it brings him great joy to be able to walk outside to his garden and see a vegetable that was in a one gallon bucket two months ago that is now 3-4 feet tall.

Getting abundance where it was never available is quite an accomplishment and one that should have Locavores picking up their forks and digging in.

For more information visit [www.perfectisland.us/Edibles.html](http://www.perfectisland.us/Edibles.html) or Call Caryn Hodge 941-778-8705.

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