A local youth group is growing through gardening. Community gardening is a popular way to share more than just vegetables. Under the leadership of Pete Bauknight, 19 boys are participating in a special gardening project sponsored by RESPECT for Boys. The teens are learning to garden for the first time. Beginning with fencing the space, digging in the dirt and planting seeds, the youth started a garden earlier this year.

Thanks to a local church group, Bauknight was able to find a patch of land with full sun and access to water. Parking is nearby, making group gardening easier. The teens meet two days a week with a goal of building character through community service. The garden has helped meet both goals. Their pride and sense of accomplishment was obvious during a visit to their garden. They have already sampled their lettuce, tomatoes and herbs. Their first harvest was donated to the soup kitchen in St. Cloud operated by the Methodist Church. Additional harvests are on the way.

The garden was selected as a community service project to provide fresh vegetables to help our less-fortunate residents. The project has yielded more than produce. The youth are learning a valuable self-help life skill in food production, as well as getting opportunities to develop skills in teamwork, responsibility and respect.

Bauknight is proud of the youths and feels they have learned how to get along with others since being involved in the gardening project. He explained that one of the most valuable things the young men have gained from the experience has been ownership in something and the feeling of success.

He said, "They are getting to see something they started actually happen. They get excited when they see the progress and see how the plants have grown each time they visit." When asked about the most dramatic change in the youth since they began the program, he answered, "the way they treat each other. They get along much better now."

The successes the RESPECT for Boys program has seen are not unique. Churches, schools, convalescent centers, assisted-living facilities and others are embracing community gardening. The many benefits include community development, personal therapy, team building, community pride and beautification, in addition to food production.

Participants in community gardens come from diverse backgrounds and abilities and learn from each other as they share gardening stories. Planning, soil-preparation techniques, planting seasons, nurturing, recommended varieties for our area and harvesting are all important principles learned the best way: hand on.

Gardens can go most anywhere as long as there is at least six hours of full sun. Gardens can be designed in small spaces between homes or in unused parking lots. If the soil is poor or there is no soil, as in a parking area, then container gardens, above-ground growing units and raised beds work well.

Good soil is brought in, so veggies produce well. Butterfly gardens, cutting gardens, reflecting ponds and water gardens are often incorporated into community gardens. Sitting areas, picnic tables and playgrounds make the areas functional community centers.

If your church or organization is interested in learning more about community gardening or would like to make a donation to support such efforts, contact Eleanor Foerste at (321) 697-3000. Additional resources
are available through the American Community Gardening Association at www.communitygarden.org. Hank Bruce and Tomi Folk, local authors and specialists in horticulture as therapy, have written several books and are working with local community gardens. They are available at 352-383-2704.

Gardening offers so many opportunities. Help others learn those benefits by starting or supporting local community gardening efforts.

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**Sister Cities Festival**

Osceola Master Gardeners will be at the Sister Cities Festival at Archie Gordon Park in Buenaventura Lakes on Sunday afternoon from 11 a.m. until 6 p.m. Bring plant samples for identification or problems for diagnosis. Listen to Latin music and enjoy ethnic foods while supporting the efforts to help farm families in Santa Maria, Peru, Kissimmee's sister city. Master Gardeners are also available on Mondays from 2 to 5 p.m. and on Thursdays from 9 a.m. until noon. Call (321) 697-3000.

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