Parks That Teach

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Formally implemented in December 2013, Parks That Teach is a public–private partnership between the City of Punta Gorda, The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Master Gardener Program, and Team Punta Gorda® with a grant from the Charlotte Community Foundation®. Part of the corridor of the Punta Gorda Pathways, Parks That Teach provides guided tours led by UF/IFAS Master Gardeners who walk participants though this special “teachable moment” trail. The tour starts on Charlotte Harbor and emphasizes the importance of protecting the estuary. The participating Master Gardeners conducting these tours receive specialized training regarding the flora and fauna along the pathways. On this pathway, visitors view the unique ecosystems of the mangroves, identify trees and shrubs, and learn how these plants can fit into a home landscape. Additionally, participants experience the habitats that support many different Florida creatures including birds, reptiles, fish, and mammals. The Master Gardener guides introduce Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ plants, many of which have signage, as well as invasive plants found in Southwest Florida. Special attention is also given to the extensive mangrove community as a valued habitat for fish, birds, crabs, and other creatures as well as the ability of the mangroves to survive under low oxygen and saline environments. Data collected has included the number of participants and survey feedback providing impact to this effort.

Materials and Methods

Parks That Teach was set up to cover about five city blocks totaling one-half mile of walking along part of the Punta Gorda Pathways area in the City of Punta Gorda. The trail not only intersected cultivated landscapes, but also natural areas prominently featuring mangroves (Fig. 1). A bulletin board kiosk was constructed on the trail to promote upcoming walks and the dates. Permanent signage was also designed and installed to identify trees (Fig. 2). A handy booklet was developed highlighting all of the trees and plants noted on the trail which was both in printed form and available electronically (Parks That Teach—Punta Gorda Pathways <http://ci.punta-gorda.fl.us/depts/growthmgmt/documents/ParksthatTeachBrochure122013_000.pdf>). A smaller brochure was also printed for outreach and marketing purposes. This was also enhanced with an electronic version on the Charlotte County UF/IFAS Extension and City of Punta Gorda websites. The tours were held twice monthly, the first Saturday at 8:00 am and the third Wednesday at 9:30 am. Ten Master Gardeners were trained as guides and normally worked in groups of two or more (Fig. 3). In addition to the general public, special group walks were arranged for civic associations and garden clubs. Specifically, the walks begin near Fisherman’s Village and crosses Marion, Olympia, and Shreve Streets to Cross Street (U.S. 41).

Results and Discussion

An electronic survey was conducted to obtain follow-up feedback from the participants with 38 respondents. When asked the question, “Which Florida Yard topic(s) were reinforced on the walking tour? Choose any that apply”, 57.89% selected Right Plant, Right Place. Water Efficiently was chosen by 34.21%, and Protect the Waterfront obtained 36.84%. When asked, “What...
did you like best about the walking tour? Choose one or two”, 74.36% indicated that the Educated and Trained Guides were impressive. This was followed by 51.28% selecting The Diversity of Wildlife Observed, 30.77% choosing having Their Questions Answered, and 28.21% appreciating The Location (Proximity to Fisherman’s Village). One written comment captured indicated that “I appreciated being educated about our local environment and impressed with the wealth of knowledge of our Extension Services Department!” They also recorded specific things that they learned such as “learned about the three types of mangroves” and “invasive plants such as Brazilian pepper tree.”

As a result of the Parks That Teach Program, 232 individuals participated over a 13-month period on 18 walks in total. As many as thirty-two (32) participants joined the walks, which average from 75–90 minutes long.

Additionally, Parks That Teach was featured on “Florida on a Tankful” with Bay News 9 in Tampa <http://www.baynews9.com/content/news/baynews9/on-the-town/article.html/content/news/articles/cfn/2014/10/1/punta_gorda_green_th.html> (Fig. 4).

Overall, this initiative has been very successful with future goals of continued trail enhancement and perhaps program duplication in other areas of Charlotte County.