

The fruit of their labor

Rotary clubs, community help start orchard for The Path

By Nancy Kennedy

Sunday, April 12, 2015 at 7:21 pm (Updated: April 13, 8:02 pm)

LECANTO - For many families, when one apple can cost a dollar and one orange can cost 50 cents, fresh fruit is a luxury.



ZODEE TREIER/For the Chronicle

Rotarians Art Jones, Charles Li, Sirjan Li and Mark Yerman plant fruit trees Saturday on land behind Anson's Nursery in Lecanto. Charles Li and his wife, Sirjan Li, volunteer to rake the algae out of the bay. Art Jones said that they use the algae out of King's Bay because it not only destroys the habitat, it also is a great fertilizer — rich in nutrients and great for water retention. Mark Yerman said the group is planting the trees so people can have fresh fruit. Members of the county's Rotary clubs are planting the trees as part of the The Path's mission to provide the homeless and hungry with fresh, vitamin-rich produce.

That shouldn't be, says DuWayne Sipper, executive director of The Path of Citrus County. For the past 10 years, The Path has operated a farm, growing fresh vegetables that go to feed the hungry of Citrus County.

Now, thanks to a partnership between The Path, all six local Rotary clubs and county government, the hungry can look forward to eating fresh fruit as a daily staple.

On Saturday, Rotary club members, led by Crystal River Rotary, planted the first 50 fruit trees at "the Grove," the site of a fruit orchard dedicated to helping feed the hungry of Citrus County. The land, 10 acres behind Anson's Nursery on Homosassa Trail, belongs to the county and has been leased to the Rotary clubs for 99 years, \$1 per year.

"It started years ago when I ran into DuWayne at El Ranchito and asked him about the fish farm he had been working on," said Blair Commons, Crystal River Rotary member and Grove project director. "He said that wasn't working out, so I asked him what his next vision was. He said he wanted to have a fruit tree orchard. So we sat and talked about what it would take and how we could make it happen."

Over the next few years, the Rotary club and Sipper, who is also a Rotarian with the Inverness club, worked out the details.

"We said, the Rotary club would acquire the land and raise funds for start-up costs if The Path would use their farming expertise and manpower to run it," Commons said. "We've had two Beast Feast events to raise funds for hunger in Citrus County, with about 60 percent going toward the Grove project. We've cleared the first 5 acres, put in a well and The Path has delivered mulch and Lyngbya (algae), and we saved the potash from burning the trees to use for fertilizer."

He added that the other five local Rotary clubs have donated funds over the past two years, and the project has received matching funds from a district Rotary grant.

"Also, the project is up for a Rotary International service award because of its potential far-reaching effects on our community," Commons said.

Initially, 50 trees in five varieties will go first, followed in six months with 50 more trees. Each 5 acres can support 500 trees.

The first five varieties, all Florida-climate zone compatible, include: Anna and Dorsett apples, Florida bell peaches, Scarlet Beauty plums and Fuyu persimmons.

The goal is to plant many varieties of fruit trees so there will be a steady harvest of different fruit throughout the year, enough to feed people but not an overabundance of any one crop that would spoil.

As the fruit is harvested, it will go to the Community Food Bank to be distributed by the local agencies that distribute food to county residents.

Sipper said this is just a start.

"I've always had this idea of food for the community," he said. "There's vacant land all over Citrus County, and I'd love to see the county do something with it, 'edible landscaping.' Our churches, too, are sitting on tons of land. I'd love to see food growing anywhere you go in Citrus County.

"People are definitely interested in their health and eating healthier, away from processed foods and more fresh foods," he said. "I think the idea has traction."

Chronicle reporter Nancy Kennedy at 352-564-2927 or nkennedy@chronicleonline.com.