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Health can be found in the home garden

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By Robin Robinson Citizen Columnist

No one thinks of the Keys as a major farming community anymore, but it was in the 1800s. Thousands of bushels of tomatoes were produced and canned. In 1882 Keys farmers sold \$200,000 worth of pineapples aloe. They sold Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes cabbage, beets, carrots, turnips, and cassava as well as the plentiful fruit from trees.

Capt. Ben Baker farmed Plantation Key, according to Jerry Wilkerson, and had a cash crop of pineapples that returned \$7,000, which he shipped using his own vessels while he lived in Key West. Farmers grew fruit trees in what they called Red Holes. These were natural holes 15 to 30 feet in diameter growing pots where the soil was deep and colored red.

The Upper Keys were the main growing areas because they get 20 inches more rain than Key West. Pineapple farms closed when the ferries and railroad could provide cheaper fruit from Cuba to the mainland. When the highway opened up, land became more valuable as housing developments flourished and farms closed down. The water table dropped five to seven-feet as a result of the population increase.

At the recent GLEE annual meeting, Rick Smith, president of the May Sands Gardens, explained why the Community Gardens are re-establishing farming on a small scale. Recently re-designed gardens grow some of the most successful crops from past years. Especially excellent are the new non-GMO papaya trees, banana trees and eggplant bushes. These grow year round and produce year after year. Smith is calling this area of the plot our Communal Food Forest. It is mixed plants instead of a row of the same plant, so that a disease does not jump from one plant to another.

Fruit growing in the gardens include mulberry, cumquat, star fruit, fig, and dragon fruit. Plots are watered with a system of ollas, permeable water vessels buried in the ground. A 2,500-gallon rain tank, which collects water off of the school's roof, is the primary source of water.

Vegetables grown in private plots include high yield basil, dill, parsley, beans, collards, tatsoi, purslane, moringa, leaf celery, thyme, fennel, onions, various lettuces, asparagus, sweet potatoes, Seminole pumpkins, sweet peppers, Jalapeño peppers and kale. Unlike many supermarket greens, these are rich in nutrients and contain no chemical fertilizers. Gardeners are continually experimenting with what grows well in the Key West climate.

David The Good wrote several excellent reference books, "Create Your Own Florida Food Forest" and "Totally Crazy Easy Florida Gardening." He does make it sound easy and gives lots of tips for purchasing individual species of plants.

The gardens cooperate with schools offering free gardens for students and teachers and free communal membership for teachers. A \$75 membership provides a plot of private ground, rights to communal fruits and vegetables, mulch, fresh soil, compost and a membership in GLEE. A communal membership costs \$50 and provides access to the communal beds, which circle the central private gardens. The gardens are open on Saturday mornings for any inquiries.

"It is not necessary to replace all of your food with garden-fresh items, even replacing a small amount makes a difference," said Rick Smith. It all adds up.

NOTES

The Key West Garden Club welcomes volunteers to work on the historic fort, pull weeds, propagate plants and play in the sandy soil at West Martello Tower from 9 a.m. to noon on Mondays.

Key West Master Gardener Robin Robinson was a columnist for the Chicago Daily News and syndicated with Princeton Features.

Her books "Plants of Paradise" and award-winning "Roots, Rocks and Rain: Native Trees of the Florida Keys," can be found at

the Garden Club. This column is part of a series developed by the Key West Garden Club. For information visit www.keywestgardenclub.com.

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