

## THE FOOD FOREST vs. THE FOOD DESERT

Summer 2020

The first in a series of articles on this subject by Howard P. Clark, Jr., Vice Mayor of Pembroke Park

Something very special is happening in Pembroke Park. Something that sets us apart from every other municipality in Broward County, indeed in the entire State of Florida. In fact, it puts our little Town in a very exclusive group of communities in the entire United States. One of only about a half dozen.

What am I talking about?

We in Pembroke Park have established a “Food Forest” within the Town.

So what is a food forest and why is it important. Well, let me explain.

First, you need to know that the US Dept. of Agriculture has designated an area in Pembroke Park around 56<sup>th</sup> Avenue and some areas of Hallandale Beach Boulevard, 48<sup>th</sup> Avenue and County Line Road as a “Food Desert.”

A Food desert is an area where the nearest grocery store is a mile or more away and it is in an area of low income.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Mayor Ashira Mohammed, Commissioner Rey Dieuville, Clerk Commissioner Geoffrey Jacobs and Commissioner Gina Cohen for allowing me to establish a food forest to mitigate or eliminate the ill effects of having a portion of our town designated as a “food desert.”

Some common ill effects found in a Food desert: diabetes, obesity and malnutrition, to name a few. We are trying to help establish “food sustainability,” “food stability” and “food security,” especially in light of the new USDA rules affecting the SNAP program and other food programs and more recently the economic problems caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

We are doing this by establishing a food forest to provide the community with fruits and vegetables such as, Papayas, star fruit, collard greens, okra, tomatoes, beans, various leafy greens, and lots of other varieties of fruits and vegetables as they come into season.

As the Lead Commissioner for the Pembroke Park Food Forest and Community Garden, this project has become so much more than a job for me – it is my passion to work in the forest and garden and watch these plants and trees grow knowing that they will be able to provide so many of our needy residents,

such as low income, the mentally challenged, children, and our veterans, with nutritious food that they might not otherwise have access to.

I am fortunate to be joined by a growing number of incredibly enthusiastic volunteers from our community! Both individual members of the Agro-Eco Gardens and Educational Center and groups such as the Professional Firefighters Association of South Florida, Capoeira Maculele, Hands On Broward and Pembroke Park Church of Christ.

Since November 2019, we have given out over 4000 lbs. of papayas. We have also given out great quantities of okra, star fruit and leafy greens and many others.

Located on 52rd avenue, the Community Garden and Food Forest, sits on 10 acres of green space that the Town acquired through a grant from the Broward County Parks Acquisition Bond. It was designated as Ryan Park and lies next to the Oglesby Preserve which, by the way, now offers a scenic trail and exercise path. I encourage residents to come out and see the Pembroke Park Food Forest Orchard and Community Garden – lush and beautiful and now bursting with fruits, vegetables and herbs.

The goals and objectives of our project are multi-purposed: besides providing nutritious fruits and vegetables, the garden and food forest were established to honor the Town's origins as an agricultural community, and further, to provide a real hands on educational experience, as well as a unique agri-tourism destination that one can simply walk around in and enjoy.

The community garden is currently producing carrots, tomatoes, Chinese Bok Choy (a leafy green), marigolds, green onions, Malabar spinach, sweet potatoes, basil, purslane, green pepper, peppermint, spearmint, and chocolate mint, thyme, chives, chard, Everglades cherry tomatoes, purple collard greens and purple passion fruit – to name just some of the wonderful plants growing in the garden.

As we leave the community garden, we first come to the Circle of Palms where individuals and groups that have contributed to the garden or supported the Town in a significant way have a coconut palm tree planted in their honor complete with commemorative plaque: County Commissioner Barbara Sharif, the Professional Firefighters Association of South Florida, the 2018 Lake Forest Elementary School 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Class (which came out and planted trees in the Ryan Park), Capoeira Maculele (the originator of the Community Garden) and Pembroke Park Church of Christ, to name some of the honorees.

The Food forest has over 100 exotic fruit trees: various varieties of papaya trees, coconut palms, star fruit, banana, avocado, Japanese plum, jack fruit, Florida pistachio, macadamia nut, and mango and many others too numerous to name them all here.

Structurally, a Food forest consists of various levels: the Over Canopy which consists of pine and oak trees; the Under Story consisting of some of the taller fruit trees such as papaya, banana and palms; the Herbaceous Level which has bush like plants; the Ground Cover such as perennial peanut grass; the Root Zone – sweet potatoes and carrots for example; and, Vines – passion fruit vines.

What further sets us apart is the presence in our orchard of a burrowing owl family which is an endangered species. We are truly blessed by the arrival of the burrowing owl family. They joined the Pembroke Park community at our invitation. We set about to create a habitat for this endangered species because these owls were in the way of development of a vacant lot in our neighboring city of West Park. To do this right, we invited the Audubon Society to come out and help us build a nesting home for the owls. The funny part is that the owls came to the orchard and food forest and despite a perfectly pre-prepared nesting area we made for them, they picked their own spot!

In order to build and maintain something as intricate as a food forest and community garden, in addition to the many hours of physical labor, one needs people with expertise. We now have a staff member who has been approved by the Town Commission to take classes to receive a designation as a Master Gardener – She will be taking the classes on her own time. In addition, at my own expense, I have signed up for further education as well – to get a Permaculture Design Certificate.

No one in Pembroke Park will go hungry. Although, fruit and vegetables will be available to any resident of the Town, one of our main goals is to provide temporary assistance to “food security” challenged residents to help them through a difficult time – especially during this time of economic difficulty for so many due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but more about that later in article.

Last, I will mention that in the course of developing our food forest, we traveled to the Brown’s Mill Food forest in Atlanta Ga., to see how another city handles establishing a food forest. It was a tremendously rewarding experience where we shared and exchanged information with them to our mutual benefit. The food forest concept is a very new concept – which puts the little Town of Pembroke Park on the forefront of nutritional urban sustainability.

We are not just talking about eliminating the “food desert,” we are doing it! For example, as Mayor Mohammed had, even prior to the pandemic, organized food giveaways from time to time, on Saturday, March 22, 2020, she expanded this effort as the Town hosted the first in a series of regular weekly food giveaways at the Ryan Park. Over 1600 residents from our town and from the surrounding communities drove by to receive bags of different kinds of food including fresh fruits and vegetables being distributed to them by the Mayor, myself, the other Commissioners and Town staff. The fresh food came from leafy greens and fruit grown in our developing food forest: the community garden and fruit tree orchard plus contributions from Feeding South Florida, Farm Share and others. One of the things that we learned from our Atlanta experience is that a community garden can’t do it all by itself. To eliminate a “food desert,” you have to marshal resources from various different elements: grocery store chains, local markets, the various groups that have organized to eliminate hunger and malnutrition that I have mentioned and a community garden. It is a blueprint for success!

And what a success it has been!

The food forest expands and continues to produce copious amounts of fruits and vegetables that are distributed to our residents. I am pleased to announce that bananas and sugar cane have been added to the food forest repertoire and are now being distributed to the public. In addition, the Town obtained a FRDAP grant from the state that will be used to construct a walkway through the food forest and provide some picnic tables so that visitors can wander through the Pembroke Park Food forest orchard, learn about the various exotic fruit trees there or relax and picnic as they enjoy this amazing place.

From the beginning of the pandemic lock down, when we didn’t know when we would be able to go to the grocery stores safely again, the Mayor and your Commissioners stood on the front line with masks and gloves handing out food to those in need.

It has now been over three months since the Town has been conducting the Saturday food giveaways, providing food to thousands of needy families each week. This effort, spearheaded by Mayor Ashira Mohammed and myself as your Vice Mayor along with the full support of Commissioner Ray Dieuville, Clerk Commissioner Geoffery Jacobs and Commissioner Gina Cohen, has not only addressed the dire circumstance of families in need as a result of the Covid Crisis, but it demonstrated that we can, and we

did, bring about the elimination of our “food desert.” And I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of them and the many city employee and other volunteers who have supported this effort and worked so hard. The Mayor and I are especially appreciative of Commissioners Dieuveille, Jacobs, who came out and volunteered at the food giveaways almost every week. I know that I speak for the Mayor and the other Commissioners when I say that it is gratifying indeed, both as a person and as a local elected official, to be able help people in their time of need – to know that our little Town of Pembroke Park is capable of doing so much to help so many not just from Pembroke Park, but people from the surrounding communities as well.

As I have said, in order to successfully fight hunger and malnutrition many elements must be brought together: The Pembroke Park Food forest, supported by the Mayor and Commission and working with Feeding South Florida, Farm Share and so many other organizations and volunteers, has played an integral part of that fight, the fight to eliminate the food desert. And we did it.

No one should ever go hungry in the United States of America and no one will go hungry in Pembroke Park.