

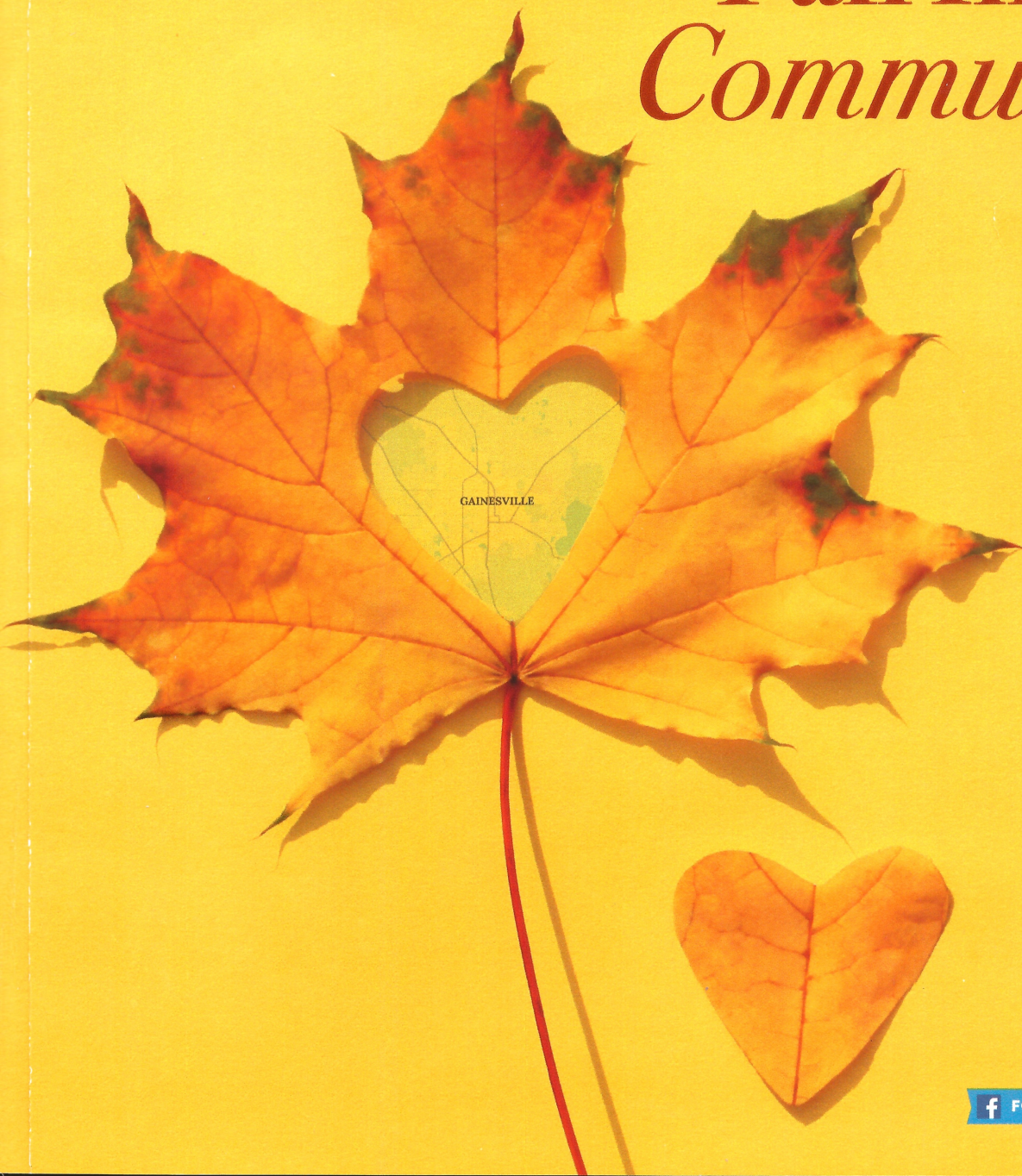
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BONUS SECTION: A SHOWCASE THAT LIFTS UP THE KIND WORDS IN CUSTOMER TESTIMONIALS FOR LOCAL BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Our Town

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Fall Into *Community*



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THE FALL HORTICULTURAL EXPO AND PLANT MARKET

Where the Wild Things Grow

WRITTEN BY DANA BRYAN

Mini cows will answer the playful bleats of goats, while the gentle crunch of hay bales being tossed sets the soundtrack of the day. Children will giggle at the word “shucks” as conversations spark over fascinating scientific discoveries and practical tips for gardening in Gainesville. Pumpkins and scarecrows will make their appearance, but they’ll have to compete with the mouthwatering scent of fresh desserts and the warmth of a hot, hearty lunch from local businesses.

“It’s like magic,” Kathy Stephens, co-chair of the Fall Horticultural Expo and Plant Market and treasurer of the Gainesville Garden Club, said. The Fall Horticultural Expo and Plant Market is a once-a-year, family-friendly, and free event that channels the warm, welcoming energy of autumn and encourages the community to learn about local agriculture, gardening, and animals in a way that is both fun and educational. At the Alachua County Agriculture and

Equestrian Center on October 18, the Gainesville Garden Club and the Florida Master Gardener Volunteer Program, managed by the UF IFAS Extension, will showcase the exciting, unifying, and beautiful nature of gardening.

“The magic of the natural world is not to be discounted. It’s the most valuable treasure we can pass down to our children,” Stephens said.

This year’s theme, “Where the Wild Things Grow,” embodies the season’s homey charm in growing native plants, like wildflowers, that can help contribute to supporting an environmentally friendly and Florida-friendly garden and yard. Inside the venue will be a world of its own with a demo on making your own seed paper; a booth on learning how to plant pollinator pots; vendors selling everything from coffee to honey to soil to seeds and offering information on each of them; tree giveaways; flower arrangement demonstrations; a 4H Horsey Yard Sale; a



seed shucking exhibit; a kids zone for children to fill their senses while learning about insects, plant life cycles, and science exploration; and much more for visitors of all ages to enjoy.

“It’s a really nice mix of up-to-date information on what organizations and research is going on right now and commercial vendors who have really amazing products that help make gardening [easy] and help us think about our responsibility to the environment,” Cynthia Nazario-Leary, the co-chair of the Fall Horticultural Expo and Plant Market, the environmental horticulture extension agent for UF IFAS in Alachua County, and the Master Gardener Volunteer coordinator, said. With over 75 vendors, a spectrum of sponsors that range from commercial to nonprofit, and the keynote speaker Jennifer Jewell, host of the radio show “Cultivating Place,” this event is one you won’t want to miss.

“[Gardening is] a sense of wonder. It’s optimism. If you work out in your garden, if you grow plants, if you love to feed the birds and bring them into your yard, if you like to see ladybugs or frogs, it inspires you, and it helps you to believe that there is a wonderful future ahead. If you garden, you have to have an optimistic spirit,” Stephens said

The event will take place from 9 am to 4 pm, but vendors might sell out early. There will be ample parking, including extra parking for people with disabilities. There will be live music and food trucks selling food at a variety of price points. Rain or shine, this event will go on. The venue is covered and protected from outdoor elements.

“We’re really focused on sharing resources and information with the public so they can make more informed decisions about how they garden, what they’re adding to their own environments, and how to better engage with the community,” Nazario-Leary said.

Nazario-Leary explains that she knows how vital each group’s role is in the environment because she witnesses it every day in her work.

“I’ve always felt like we should try to get everybody together so that people can see the bigger picture,” she said. “When you support birds, you’re also supporting other wildlife and other types of plants, or if you love trees, then you’re supporting all the wildlife that uses those trees. If you’re really into amending your soil and trying to create more organic matter, you’re also supporting creating soil environments that are microbial-rich, and [you’re] supporting beneficial insects.”

Nature is inherently community-based.

“We need everybody to have their part to really move the needle forward. If we’re going to create spaces or environments that support wildlife and are more environmentally sustainable, it takes all of us working together and acknowledging our strengths to create more win-win collaborations. That really was the dream of having this,” she said.

Both women notably gave credit to the other for making this event possible.

Stephens acknowledges, “We’re building our event piece by piece. This isn’t in my background. This isn’t my knowledge base. Cynthia definitely brings the brains to the activity.”

While Nazario-Leary recognizes, “Kathy Stephens is the battery that runs this [event]. She has an incredible amount of energy and passion. She has a vision, and we couldn’t do it without each other.”

Both Nazario-Leary and Stephens grew up around plants and nature, feeling most at home and at ease when embracing the calming, natural essence of the earth.

Plants punctuate their memories, being fastened and neatly stitched into the fabric of growing up.

"I grew up trailing behind my grandfather and his big, beautiful backyard garden, watching little asparagus tips pop up through the ground and cherries grow on the trees," Stephens fondly remembers. "The magic of our natural world surrounded me."

"[Gardening is] a sense of wonder. It's optimism."

Nazario-Leary's mom was an avid organic gardener. Some of her earliest memories are harvesting crops, like tomatoes, broccoli, and corn, and learning about animals within that ecosystem, like grasshoppers, butterflies, and lady beetles.

Her abuela on her father's side had a kitchen garden.

"One summer, I stayed there, and she had a story for each of those plants. I remember feeling so connected to the plants via these stories, and I thought that it was really special that these plants had these cultural connections. I started to see how it wasn't just that you're growing herbs or you're growing tomatoes. It's that there's a story behind that, a meaning behind that. Even if it was just a tale or some anecdote or it was a personal story, I started to put plants and stories together," she said.

As she got older, a love for science followed suit, and after a summer at a nonprofit and then grad school at the University of Hawaii, ethnobotany—plant stories—and plant science came together.

"I don't separate people from nature. I think that if we are to succeed in trying to be more environmentally sustainable, then we have to see ourselves as part of the environment that we live in. I'm hoping our event can strengthen that with the people who come to visit."

The Fall Horticultural Expo and Plant Market will be a day when memories will be made. Bring your family. Bring your boyfriend. Bring your girlfriend. Bring a friend. Bring yourself. It's a day of chatting, eating, and simply having a good time.

"Come for the day. Come for a few hours. Listen and learn. You won't have to spend a dime if you don't want to," Stephens said. "Just come and have fun."

Venture into the fall season with sprouting plant knowledge and a burgeoning level of understanding. Become grounded and connected with the soil beneath your feet and move with a new sense of grace, peace, and confidence in knowing that you can do your part. A little help from the community, and for the community, goes a long way. **OT**



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