

Master Gardeners

Rebuild Public Landscapes on Coast



Fred Owens of Bethel Springs, Tenn., along with James Harding of Gautier and Jerry Morse of Vicksburg, plant trees at Gautier City Park during Operation Swarm.

By Patti Drapala

Sixteen projects were completed across three counties in less than 72 hours when Mississippi Master Gardeners set Operation Swarm in motion last October.

Most of the public landscapes in Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties were damaged or destroyed after the onslaught of the waves and winds of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This time, however, the weather cooperated for positive change on the Gulf Coast.

More than 100 Master Gardener volunteers from several states enjoyed sunshine and balmy temperatures as they dug holes, spread mulch and set plants as part of Operation Swarm. Mississippi Master Gardeners asked their counterparts to participate in a 3-day work period, said Lelia Kelly, horticulture specialist with the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

Kelly, who is Extension coordinator for the Mississippi Master Gardener Program, worked with members to create the swarm after individuals across the United States were persistent in offering to help rebuild coastal landscapes. Extension offices in Hancock, Harrison and Jackson counties worked with local Master Gardeners to assess job proposals from the community.

"Master Gardeners are people who never meet a stranger," Kelly said. "They work as a team, and they are selfless in their desire to get things done."

Michele Venturi, a member of a Master Gardener group at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, drove up with gloves and tools at 8 a.m. the first day of the swarm. She and

other Master Gardeners painstakingly picked out glass shards before replanting flower beds at Pineville Elementary School in Pass Christian and the Children's Library in Long Beach.

"My initial impression was of just how many lots for homes and businesses there were with nothing left," she said. "One of the Master Gardeners from Harrison County told me Katrina picked up her house and moved it three blocks away."

Many volunteers marveled at Venturi's enthusiasm and passion to help others in need.

"When this lady from Illinois showed up eager to go to work, we all thought, 'Wow!'" Kelly said. "Michele was a worker and didn't quit until everything was finished."

At Pineville, the activity of the Master Gardener group aroused the curiosity of schoolchildren and teachers, Venturi said. One teacher asked if the group needed help. The answer, of course, was a resounding "yes."

"One little boy squatted down on the edge of the bed and gently placed pansies in the holes we had dug," Kelly said. "He told us that he had never planted a flower. Perhaps we have inspired a future horticulturist."

Venturi said she was inspired by the selflessness of Gwen Jones, a determined volunteer from Covington, Tenn., who had a truck filled with daylilies, daffodils and irises she dug for her trip to Mississippi. Jones is a member of Master Gardener groups in Shelby and Tipton counties.

Since she expressed a desire to work with projects involving children, Jones worked with Venturi and others on the flower beds at Pineville Elementary and the Children's Library. She also taught children at the DeLisle/Pass Christian Elementary School about daffodils and prepared a bed for them to plant bulbs.

"I give the people on the Gulf Coast a lot of credit for their perseverance at rebuilding their community one project at a time," Jones said. "Their pride and their sense of purpose are overwhelming."

Before she left, Jones told local Master Gardeners to keep her posted when they host another swarm.

Kelly said the outpourings of assistance and donations for the swarm were heartwarming. Master Gardener groups, garden clubs and countless individuals contributed more than \$30,000 for plants and gardening supplies purchased at local businesses in the three counties.

Dan Batson, who operates Green Forest Nursery in Perkinston, donated numerous trees and shrubs. Another Mississippi firm, Van Zyverden of Meridian, delivered thousands of bulbs. A third contributor, Del Banowetz of Dubuque, Iowa, sent an 18-wheeler loaded with compost.

"The people on the Coast are so grateful to the Master Gardeners for their help in getting the area back to normal," Kelly said.