

Driving by the corner of SW 3rd St. and 4th Ave. you'll see people walking back and forth from a teal house to a lot across the street, carrying pots of plants while barefoot. Two black cats follow them into the luscious lot, which has a slight stench of onions, that three University of Florida students call the Porter's Urban Plant Project.

Kyle Giest, Kristofer Munkel and Chelsea Strawder are bringing together Porter Community by sprouting organic veggies for their neighbors.

What began as an expansion of their small garden, turned into a realization that they were going to have a surplus of vegetables.

Strawder, a 24-year-old neuroscience and anthropology senior at UF, said they needed to involve the community in their garden.

"I was just thinking about it today," she said. "It's really interesting how it went from this idea of a big home garden to working with the community to get more people involved."

This idea of brining the community together is one of the driving reasons behind this garden.

Strawder said their neighbors get an instant gratification when they help out or visit the garden.

"It's bringing people from the community into one central location," she said. "Everyone is working together to create a product, which they can then eat."

Besides providing locally grown vegetables, the three students have been working on involving kids and compost in their garden.

Many of the children in Porter Community have displayed interest in the growing garden, so they wanted to get them involved in the process.

The idea is once a week the kids from the community center will go to the garden and work on different activities. Maintaining a personal garden bed and learning how to compost is what's on the agenda for the young gardeners.

"If you can get people interested in things like this, like organic gardening and composting, at this age, they'll keep that through life," Strawder said. "Those are formative experiences at this age."

Giest, a 21-year-old biology senior at UF, has been working with Gainesville Compost and they helped the students set up their composting unit in the garden.

“They bring food waste from different restaurants and we’ll compost it on the site,” Giest said, “and then Gainesville Compost will get some of the compost and we get some compost for the garden.”

However, the compost they were receiving was not enough to produce their own soil amendments.

The students have gone around their neighborhood handing out buckets to their neighbors, which has a list on the lid saying what you can and can’t compost.

Strawder said the idea is that their neighbors put their food waste in the bucket and they’ll come every week to pick up the buckets, clean them out and leave them back on the porch of their neighbors.

“I’d say 85 percent of the people we’ve spoken to in the neighborhood have been very excited about it or if they weren’t excited they were willing to try to start,” she said.

Another reason why these three students are passionate about having a community garden is because they feel that not many people know where their produce comes from.

Giest said they want to show people that their food comes from somewhere, not just a supermarket.

“Before I started gardening I didn’t know how a broccoli plant grew. That’s kind of scary because anything could be in the food,” he said. “The process is totally a mystery for people.”

Munkel, a 22-year-old environmental geoscience senior at UF and the initiator of this garden, said more than anything, he wants people to see that having a community garden is a viable option.

“I have to imagine just it being there for people to see when they’re walking by has an affect on them and makes them understand that food is not something so difficult that you have to purchase it all the time,” Munkel said. “You can do it yourself to some extent.”

The three gardeners have acknowledged that they are part of a new culture that is forming.

Giest said that seeing the push for farmers markets, local foods and community gardens makes you want to join this effort.

“It’s moving somewhere,” he said. “You can see that it makes sense to be part of this urban agriculture movement.”

But how does something, like a community garden, flourish in Gainesville?

Munkel said he believes it’s due to the culture in town.

“There’s a lot of people who are really interested in a wide variety of things and have very open minds,” he said, “so it makes it a very easy area to develop anything new or different that you want to do.”

Strawder said that everyone is on the same page in Gainesville.

“I’m finding it to be this really beautiful community of like-minded people interested in composting and gardening, and working together as a collective,” she said.”

The three friends aren’t the only ones in Gainesville who have started a community garden.

The City of Gainesville is in charge of five community gardens that are located all around this town.

John Weber, operations supervisor for parks and recreations of Gainesville, said these types of gardens are only going to get bigger.

The people of Gainesville not only benefit from this by the food, but also it’s becomes a place for them to socialize with other members in the community, Weber said.

As of now, the three friends are the ones who work on the garden everyday. On Sundays they have workdays where they invite their friends and anyone else who wants to help over.

They always appreciate the help and they show it.

“At the end of those workdays we’ll harvest a bunch of food and then distribute that food to everyone who helped out that day,” Geist said.

The three students will be graduating this May and are going their separate paths.

Even though they won’t be the ones maintaining the garden after this semester, they’re not worried about the upkeep of their garden.

Munkel said that other community garden owners have expressed interested in taking over management of the garden.

Strawder, however, says she rather have Porter Community members take care of it.

“I also hope that some of the kids will get really involved and want to work out here more often,” she said.

Whoever is the one that gets to plant their seeds in Porter’s Urban Plant Project, the three students are confident that it will flourish.

“Either way the garden has a bright future,” Giest said. “Even without any of our input, this garden will still have a driving force, so there’s a future for it.”