CHARLOTTE COUNTY “A TREE-MENDOUS GIVEAWAY” PROGRAM

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Abstract. In September 2005, the Charlotte County Extension Service was awarded a grant of $120,348.00 from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services through their Urban Forestry Grant. The two-year grant, entitled “A Tree-Mendous Giveaway”, will help to replenish our Urban Forest, which experienced significant losses during the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons. Trees are essential to energy conservation, stormwater runoff reduction, beautification, safety and comfort. Up to 6,500 Charlotte County residences are eligible to receive two free trees. Participants receive the trees of their choice in exchange for less than an hour of their time, during which they will learn about proper planting and aftercare of their two trees.

In September of 2005, The Charlotte County Environmental and Extension Service was awarded $120,348.00 for an Urban Forestry Grant by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services geared to assist the community with replanting efforts and education on tree selection, planting and care. Titled, “A Tree-Mendous Giveaway”, this two-year grant helped develop a program of tree distribution linked with an educational component that will increase the knowledge of participants concerning proper tree planting practices.

The program was modeled off of the Miami-Dade “Adopt-A-Tree” project created in response to Hurricane Andrew (Hunsberger, 2002). The first phase of this project began in January of 2006 with a kick-off booth at our local Home and Garden Show where 1,000 residents received brochures. Local speaking engagements also were part of the marketing effort. Just prior to this first event, participants sent in applications with their two trees per residence (twelve per condominium association) selections and the date they wanted to attend the educational “adoption” program. A colorful brochure allowed participants to select and learn about the trees they were to receive. A website of this same application brochure was developed and received over 20,000 hits during the first few months that it was up. Thirteen different flowering, fruiting and shade trees were available to choose from including: East Palatka Holly (Ilex × attenuate Ashe), Star Fruit, Carambola (Averrhoa carambola L.), Walter’s Viburnum (Viburnum obovatum Walter), Loquat (Eriobotrya japonica (Thunb.) Lindl.), Weeping Bottlebrush (Callistemon viminalis (Gaertner.) G. Don f.), Crape Myrtle (Lagerstroemia indica L.), Mahogany (Swietenia mahagoni (L.) Jacq.), Weeping Yaupon Holly (Ilex vomitoria Aiton ‘Pendula’), Pink Trumpet Tree (Tabebuia heterophylla (DC) Britton), Southern Red Cedar (Juniperus virginiana L.), Bald Cypress (Taxodium distichum (L.) Rich.), Shady Lady Black Olive (Bucida buceras L. ‘Shady Lady’), Sand Live Oak (Quercus geminata Small).

Conclusion

Eight of these adoption events were held in 2006 with 4311 trees adopted in 2006 by nearly 2,000 participants.

Description of Events

A January 18th training session prepared Master Gardener volunteers to man the four learning stations and progressively instruct the participants on proper tree installation and care (Fig. 1). A total of 1,200 hours of volunteer time valued at $21,048.00 was contributed in 2006. Participants attended the prescheduled events at our office in an outside field setting (Fig. 2) where they rotated through four learning stations related to a visual demonstration and short discussion on how to properly dig the hole, place the tree in the hole, actually plant the tree and finishing touches and aftercare. A quick End-of-Program survey was conducted just before they received their trees. A six-month follow-up survey will also be conducted as we follow our clients through the development of their trees. Besides their two trees, all participants received a booklet with all of the information needed to remind them about proper planting procedures when they got home.

Fig. 1. The four station educational event prepares each participant with all the knowledge needed to properly plant a tree.
Among all of the thirteen tree choices, Crape Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia*) was the top participant selection with approximately 1,564 trees. Condominium associations were allowed twelve trees as a group effort instead of individual residences participating. By the end of the 2007 season, we should have given away nearly 13,000 trees to the residents of Charlotte County.

To date, we have received such a great response that the interest has become overwhelming. In addition to many verbal comments of increased learning, a few of the e-mail responses have been particularly encouraging: “I picked up my trees Saturday. This was one of the best organized, friendliest, easiest experiences that I never expected. Please pass this appreciation along to your co-workers and those wonderful volunteers. Being a County worker, hurricane victim, and taxpayer I am absolutely pleased with these trees. Thank you all!!!” Another e-mail noted “Just wanted to take a moment to let you know how much my Mother & I enjoyed the Tree-Mendous Tree workshop we attended last Saturday. We really learned a lot about tree care & maintenance. The Master Gardeners manning the stations were very engaging, entertaining and above all informative. We will definitely make plans to attend more workshops in the future. Thank you!”

Preliminary evaluation results will be available by the end of 2006. We expect the success to continue as we work towards “Replacing Charlotte County’s Urban Tree Canopy”.

### Literature Cited
