



## **BLOSSOMING RESILIENCE: HOW UNF VOLUNTEERS TRANSFORMED A CAMPUS AMIDST CRISIS**

**In October 2020, The University of North Florida's Grounds Department faced a 50% staffing shortage. They urgently sought volunteers to transform the campus into a Botanical Garden. Within 12 hours, six dedicated volunteers – practicing social distancing – began renovating weedy landscape beds and curating new displays. Their efforts saved an overgrown native wildflower field from being converted to turf. Now, ten garden displays proudly hold the prestigious Florida-Friendly Landscaping Gold certification. These volunteers contribute to maintenance, education, tours, and outreach, ensuring the garden thrives and promotes sustainable practices. The program has grown from 2,800 to 9,600 annual volunteer hours.**

**I**n October 2020, the University of North Florida (UNF) encountered a significant challenge. During a global pandemic, the university's grounds department experienced a 50% staffing shortage, risking the campus goal of becoming a botanical garden. With sixteen unfilled positions, the grounds crew could not maintain over 100 acres of carefully designed landscapes and more than 1,400 acres at an acceptable appearance level. Management asked the grounds department to reduce the number of landscape beds and convert many gardens to turf. Refusing to let all the efforts in achieving botanical garden status go to waste, UNF Horticulturist and volunteer Rhonda Gracie reached out to Larry Figart, Urban Forestry Agent, at the local extension services office volunteer program. Figart promptly sought help from local master gardeners. However, their involvement would not count towards any volunteer extension service hours. What followed was a remarkable demonstration of community spirit and dedication amid a global pandemic.

Above: Setzer Family Healing Garden with UNF art students' sculptures promoting native bees. (Rhonda Gracie)



Volunteers Jan Holder, Diana Openbrier and Joyce Busgalia (Rhonda Gracie)



Left: Fairy Garden workshop (Rhonda Gracie)

*Their rapid and efficient efforts were crucial in rescuing several endangered garden beds, including an overgrown native wildflower field.*



Bright Future Teen volunteers at the Edge: enhancing new native pollinator habitat (Rhonda Gracie)

Within twelve hours of the call for assistance to help UNF develop a first-class botanical garden, six dedicated garden volunteers promptly responded. They quickly rallied their fellow gardening enthusiasts to join them in making a difference while adhering to social distancing guidelines. Their rapid and efficient efforts were crucial in rescuing several endangered garden beds, including an overgrown native wildflower field. This immediate action revitalized UNF's botanical garden mission and progress. Ever since then, the volunteers have taken on more responsibilities. Besides looking after the gardens, they also help with conservation, educational outreach, and guided tours. In the first year, the program had 2,800 volunteer hours. But thanks to the volunteers' passion and the growing recognition of the garden's importance, this number has shot up to 9,600 annual volunteer hours amounting to 153 volunteers so far. This increase in volunteerism shows how dedicated the community is to the garden's success and how much they want to keep helping it grow.

The volunteers' impact goes beyond just making the campus look better. They've converted over five acres of grass into new living museums. Volunteer, Steve Davies wrote, "It is amazing to see the seamless integration of the academic content percolating inside the buildings with the surrounding gardens and walkways so that the learning experience is amplified and nurtured as students pass through (and loiter) in the outdoor spaces." Notable exhibits include The Edge, a one-acre native garden at the forest's edge, International Palm Glade, The Setzer Family Healing adjacent to Brooks College of Health, and Bioswale next to Engineering, which was co-designed with Kelly Tesiero, a volunteer and owner of The Elegant Garden. Tesiero also has provided Gracie with guidance throughout this journey. She introduced Gracie to volunteer Tosha Gaines, who helped her turn her garden plan and pitch deck into a success, resulting in over \$600K in donations.



UNF butterflygarden FFL certificate, with left to right Nancy Travers, Rhonda Gracie and Joyce Buscalgia (Rhonda Gracie)



Gracie transitioned from traditional landscape maintenance to the nine Florida-Friendly Landscaping (FFL) principles to enhance maintenance efficiency. This change aimed to reduce task times, costs, and resources while using native and FFL plants, water conservation, reducing chemical inputs, and attracting wildlife, which is crucial for maintaining Florida's unique ecosystems. For instance, we utilized oak leaves as mulch, adopted chop-and-drop pruning and trimming practices, and left a mowing buffer at the water's edge. This approach boosted beneficial insects and songbird populations while improving plant health. As a result of these efforts, the garden received ten gold certifications. These certificates showcase and educate the public on incorporating these principles at home without encountering conflicts with their Home Owners Associations.

Saturday Volunteer Work Day with Diana Openbrier demonstrating living fungus in the field using a microscope (Rhonda Gracie)

Educational programs have become the cornerstone of volunteer activities. Marty Gottlieb, one of the founding volunteers, played a key role in ensuring that the master gardeners receive Continuing Education credit when they work at the UNF Botanical Garden. Volunteers host events, give guided tours, run special workshops on topics such as Florida-Friendly Landscaping (FFL), work to restore the native hooded pitcher plant habitat with the environmental students, eliminate invasive species with the wetland club, and promote the importance of native bees that earned UNF recognition as a Bee Campus USA. These efforts, led by dedicated volunteers, have significantly enhanced the garden's educational value, and brought people closer to nature, making us all proud of the collective accomplishments.

The team of volunteers is a tapestry of dedication and resilience, with individuals bringing their unique strengths and stories to the program. Diana Openbrier, the "gardenian" angel, continues to inspire with her unwavering commitment, even in the face of a life-altering health diagnosis. Openbrier provides and prepares lunch for the Saturday volunteer group and makes teas, jellies, and cookies for tour guests throughout the year using ingredients from the garden, helping promote the garden's edible ornamental bounty. Like many of our other volunteers who have gone through unexpected life-altering events, Openbrier understands nature is medicine and the therapeutic value of being in nature and communing with fellow volunteers. Joyce Buscaglia's return from retirement to support the growing volunteer program exemplifies the spirit of dedication and selflessness that defines the team. Buscaglia works five days a week and volunteers on Saturdays in the garden with her husband, Larry Austin, to ensure the program continues to grow and run smoothly.



Mayors Youth at Work Program volunteers Keenan Jackson and Xavier Lawrence, assembling an aroid display (Rhonda Gracie)

The diverse nature of the volunteer team, including retirees, master gardeners, tree stewards, garden enthusiasts, adults with disabilities, and campus students, faculty, and staff, embodies the essence of community and collaboration. Everyone's unique background and skills contribute to the success of the program, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose. Through the efforts of volunteers like Susan Plesha, we have introduced the High School Bright Futures Program for 9th to 12th-grade students looking to complete their service hour requirements, which provides valuable life skills to teenagers, further enriching our diverse community.

The volunteer program is not just a supplement to the grounds team's efforts but a vital component of UNF's Botanical Garden. The garden's existence and success are indebted to the dedicated volunteers. Their contributions ensure the garden remains a vibrant, educational, and inspiring space for all visitors. Attracting and retaining volunteers is crucial for the continued success and growth of the garden, and we value each one.

To promote the garden and engage with potential volunteers, the program offers free tours to local garden groups, extension service offices, high school teachers, counselors, schools, and agencies that provide on-the-job training services for individuals with disabilities. Consequently, the program has successfully recruited several new team members with intellectual development disabilities and facilitated their meaningful employment opportunities elsewhere."

This experience has shown the value of adaptability and understanding people's strengths. The UNF Botanical Garden aligns volunteers with tasks they enjoy ensuring they feel fulfilled. Volunteers receive an orientation tour and training, along with tools and equipment. The Garden also provides refreshments and food to create a friendly atmosphere. Buscaglia provides weekly updates to improve communication and recognize achievements for the week. The program also hosts a spring thank-you breakfast and a fall potluck BBQ and distribute garden swag like volunteer shirts, socks, and other tchotchkes.

Today, thanks to the dedicated staff and volunteers, UNF is a registered botanical garden. Ten of our curated displays boast the prestigious FFL Gold certification. The design principles, plant selection, and maintenance combine to create a wonderful meditative experience while supporting UNF's academic mission.



**Bright Futures Teen Volunteer Program**

**PROGRAM BENEFITS**

- Develop teamwork, leadership, and communication skills
- Meet interesting people and make friends with people from different age groups and backgrounds.
- Build resume with skills that look great on job and college applications
- Work on projects that matter to the community
- Become familiar with campus life and programs.

**NEED COMMUNITY SERVICE HOURS?**

The Botanical Garden grows, installs, & cares for trees, shrubs, & plants. Assistance in maintaining participating in this program students could help identify the plants, but also contribute to the preservation and maintenance of our botanical garden.

**HOURS THAT FIT YOUR SCHEDULE**

Work opportunities Monday through Friday 9:00am-2:00pm and Saturday 8am-12:00pm. On Saturday volunteers are required to wear UNF t-shirts. Additional items may also be available upon request.

**CONTACT US**

Rhonda Gracie, Horticulturist  
 1 UNF Drive B54, Rm 1005  
 Jacksonville, FL 32224  
 904-620-4736 (GRDN)  
 unfbotanicalgarden@unf.edu

Bright Futures Teen Volunteer Program

## AUTHOR

Rhonda Gracie  
 University of North Florida,  
 Physical Facilities,  
 Grounds Department Botanical  
 Garden Horticulturist

1 UNF Drive, Bldg./ 64, rm 1005,  
 Jacksonville, FL 32224