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FEATURED

South Columbia subdivision to feature edible landscaping

KYLEE MAY *Jun 4, 2015*



BEATRIZ COSTA-LIMA/I

COLUMBIA — Adam Saunders spent much of Wednesday crawling on his hands and knees and pulling weeds from around the bushes and trees he and others have planted at The Gates, a residential subdivision being developed near Old Plank Road in southern Columbia. Every once in a while, he'd pause to pick a blueberry or a raspberry from one of the bushes and munch on it.

The Gates in many ways will be like the other subdivisions that have been popping up in this fast-growing area. Combined with the nearby Barcus Ridge, the 273-acre property will feature about 270 upscale homes along curvy streets and cul-de-sacs in a neighborhood largely surrounded by woods.

Saunders, however, is working with developer Mike Tompkins and others on one feature that will set The Gates apart: an edible landscape that not only will beautify the neighborhood but also supply its residents with locally grown food.

The idea for the Orchards at The Gates began when the Center for Urban Agriculture, where Saunders is the public outreach coordinator, contacted Tompkins last fall to encourage him to give edible landscaping a try. This spring, the project is coming to fruition.

“We literally will have gardens and orchards growing in and around areas that would normally just be planted with standard ornamental shrubs,” Tompkins said. “Our residents will be able to eat what is produced right here in their neighborhood.”

Tompkins said the notion appealed to him because he had been giving a lot of thought to his own eating habits.

"About six or seven years ago, I was overweight and saw my parents having some health problems and realized that I needed to start eating more healthy," Tompkins said. "I am a busy guy and don't have time to garden, but I want to eat food that is healthy for my body."

The edible landscape is well underway with strawberries and blueberry, raspberry and gooseberry bushes adorning the entry to the subdivision, as well as the parkway, Hepscott Court and Brackenhill Drive, and some of the common areas. Apple, cherry and serviceberry trees also have been planted. There are even papaws. Plans call for adding more edibles, including herbs, soon.

Joseph Zarr, edible landscaping manager at the Urban Agriculture Center, said ornamental shrubs and trees tend to be more expensive than edible plantings. However, the costs vary from nursery to nursery and from cultivar to cultivar.

Tim Moloney, a landscape design instructor at MU, designed the plantings for The Gates. Rost Landscaping established the plantings in four areas using organic methods and avoiding synthetic pesticides and chemicals.

The food the plants produce will be accessible to all The Gates' residents, Saunders said. As homes are built and sold, the homeowners association will gradually assume responsibility for maintaining the landscape under a partnership with the Urban Agriculture Center.

Tompkins said residents will have the advantage of getting locally grown organic food without having to plant their own garden or go to the store to buy it.

Saunders said he's excited about the partnership. "Residents will have direct access to fresh fruit and can pick it themselves."

Workshops and educational days will be arranged to help residents learn how to care for the landscape. Meanwhile, Zarr said, the center will maintain the plantings.

"We are here to provide leadership and direction," Saunders said. "We are here to shepherd them along the way."

Tompkins said the Center for Urban Agriculture will receive income from homeowner association dues that will only be used to further its mission.

Felicia Tompkins, a partner in the development of The Gates and Mike Tompkins' daughter-in-law, expects the scale of the edible landscape to grow within five years.

"We hope the residents will take over the board one day and expand it into a community garden," she said. "Ultimately, it will need to be taken over by the residents because we are just laying down the starting foundation."

Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.

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Interested in local food?

The Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture and the city of Columbia will host a public discussion on local food production, urban orchards and an expanded community garden network at 6 p.m. Tuesday in the Friends Room of the Columbia Public Library. Light refreshments will be served.

Contact Adam Saunders of the urban agriculture center at 573-356-9392 or city sustainability manager Barbara Buffaloe at 573-817-5025 for more information.

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I am a junior majoring in science and agricultural journalism and minoring in animal science with an emphasis in equine. My goal is to work for an equine magazine one day.