

Leann Barber and The Right to Garden

How a Fort Lauderdale woman helps young people to grow into good citizens – and teaches everyone how to grow their own healthy food.

You may remember the case of the Miami Shores couple who had to destroy their front-yard vegetable garden because it was illegal until state law was changed to allow it. Leann Barber's story is another case of fighting city hall for the right to grow food on your property.

Originally from South Dakota where her family grew their food, Barber worked for 35 years in IT and banking. When she moved to Florida, she became active in 4-H, the youth development program established to give young people a better agricultural education. It's a cause dear to her heart. "Kids don't know how to grow or cook," she says. Barber set out to buy vacant residential lots in Broward to turn into a community garden serving neighborhood youth.

Because of restrictive zoning laws, growing a food forest of fruits and vegetables on your own property was not as simple as it seemed. In 2013, Miami Shores made national headlines when the city cited Tom Carroll and Hermine Ricketts for violating a municipal ordinance making their front-yard vegetable garden illegal. Faced with costly fines, Tom and Hermine had to uproot their edible garden. Florida's Third District Court of Appeals upheld the garden ban, essentially concluding that there's no constitutional right to grow your own food on your residential property.

But with help from the Institute for Justice (IJ), a nonprofit public-interest law firm, the couple got state legislators to pass a law in 2019 protecting Floridians' right to garden and prohibiting local governments from regulating vegetable gardens on residential property.

Florida is one of two states (Illinois is the other) to pass the Right to Garden Act, says IJ senior attorney Ari Bargil. "Localities can still pass general laws governing landscaping, for example, but any ordinance directly regulating vegetable gardens – defined by law as 'a plot of ground where herbs, fruits, flowers or vegetables are cultivated for human ingestion' – is void and unenforceable," he says.

Barber continued acquiring plots of land in unincorporated Broward. One of those was a piece of land, vacant for at least 20 years, that she planned to use as a working garden where 4-H youth and adult volunteers could grow their own food and share their knowledge with the community.

MADE IN BROWARD

Once they started to work on the property, Broward County code enforcement shut it down, citing them for illegal dumping – the dump was their mulch pile – and arguing the gardening bill did not apply. The Institute for Justice stepped in again, and Broward withdrew its case. On the site now are hundreds of fruit and spice trees, perennial vegetables and medicinal herbs. Their beekeeper manages hives in the corner of the property, and they propagate cuttings and give away seeds to neighbors and 4-H club members. On May 18, the Longwing 4-H Food Forest was officially dedicated to the memory of Hermine Ricketts, who died shortly after the right to garden law was signed.

In 2013, Leann set up the not-for-profit Made



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEANN BARBER

Barber at the May dedication of the Longwing 4-H Food Forest.

in Broward, an enterprise to prepare local youth for adulthood as contributing citizens. The group subscribed to Teddy Roosevelt's belief that 'The first requisite of a good citizen in this Republic of ours is that he shall be able and willing to pull his weight; that he shall not be a mere passenger, but shall do his share in the work that each generation of us finds ready to hand; and, furthermore, that in doing his work he shall show, not only the capacity for sturdy self-help, but also self-respecting regard for the rights of others.'

Through Made in Broward, young members learn to make and sell items like handmade soaps and candles, lip balm, moringa hair and scalp products, insect repellent, totes and toys and apron sets. At the 4-H Club, the Flagler Village Monarchs learn sewing, gardening, food preservation, cooking and soap-making. They develop skills in production, communication, finance, construction, engineering, problem solving, salesmanship and teamwork.

And there is the food growing in the community gardens. Barber is passionate about the food forest approach to these spaces. "My dream is to get a lot more public space growing and be a model for other areas," she says. "We are so fortunate that we can grow highly nutritious foods in our backyards: chaya, moringa, katuk, bananas, papaya. The food forest is the easiest way to go. Look at what we can grow!"



Longwing 4-H Food Forest dedication and longwings.

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madeinbroward.org
LONGWING 4-H FOOD FOREST
2831 W 11 PL, Fort Lauderdale