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Farm-to-table fare coming soon to a menu near you

By DAVID R. CORDER, Daily Sun Senior Writer 6 hrs ago



The Villages Grown is a source of pride for, from left, Kelsea Manly, The Villages director of operations; Ryan McCabe, The Villages operations manager; Jennifer Waxman, program executive director; Steve Shrump, production manager; and Adam Wright, Villages Grown director of operations.

Bill Mitchell, Daily Sun

The Villages is sowing seeds for a healthy lifestyle, and its farm-to-table initiative is bearing fruit. Born of the desire to help create and support a local food source, The Villages Grown will provide area residents and restaurants with sustainably grown produce. Now,

the first harvest of this beyond-organic venture is only months away. The biggest benefit to locally grown produce is the preservation of nutrient density that's otherwise lost in transit, said Kelsea Manly, The Villages director of operations. "It's no secret that what you feed your body fuels it," she said. "And as Villagers are exploring more lifestyle to love, The Villages Grown plans to be their fuel." The "food as medicine" approach is another facet of the community's vision to become America's Healthiest Hometown. "Resident feedback was the impetus for the project," Manly said. "Without feedback through our resident survey, we couldn't have known that our health-conscious Villagers have a growing desire for fresh, local, farm-to-fork options, both within our local dining establishments and in their own homes. Without that information, the spark to research food systems and controlled agriculture by the development team would never have ignited."

Produce grown at this farm, located at the corner of Morse Boulevard and State Road 44, exceeds national and international organic growing standards, said Jennifer Waxman, the program's executive director.

"We're able to dial in the exact nutrients so we have a consistent product in both taste and feel," she said. "Obviously, it's going to taste more delicious."

Waxman said the team is "going to put our money where our mouth is, literally and figuratively" in using a third-party to verify nutrient density.

It's all part of enhancing The Villages lifestyle, said Ryan McCabe, The Villages operations manager.

"We're doing so many things to make this place somewhere you can come and live a happier life," he said. "But the important piece about food was missing. So, that's how The Villages Grown was born, and I think residents are going to be really excited."

He said it will not only be healthy, but also convenient.

For example, he said, restaurants in The Villages will clearly identify The Villages Grown produce on their menus.

“One of our big goals is getting as much produce we can out to The Villages’ restaurants, the assisted-living facilities, hospitals and things like that,” he said. “Residents also are going to have access to different retail outlets. They’ll be able to walk into a grocery-type store setting and buy directly from The Villages Grown.”

McCabe said an Airstream trailer has been outfitted to travel the community offering produce harvested less than a day earlier.

Every aspect of this controlled-agricultural project centers on quality, said Adam Wright, The Villages Grown director of operations who is in charge of growing, food safety, distribution and retail.

“My No. 1 priority is having food safety at the highest level of standards,” he said. “And we’re doing a very good job of that.”

One of the top priorities is eliminating any chance of contamination, Wright said.

“Most facilities of this magnitude really don’t have a decontamination area; you just walk into an open area and get sprayed down and you have booties on,” he said. “Everyone who goes into our facility has to walk through a room and get to that certain standard before they are allowed to actually enter the facility. It’s not just for food safety. It’s for bugs, pests, anything that lands on the ground from your shoe that could get into our greenhouses.”

These precautionary measures exceed the federal Food Safety Modernization Act, he said.

The project will adhere to GlobalGap, an international standard for best agricultural practices, said Steven Shrump, The Villages Grown operations and production manager.

“We’re able to control about 1,400 things,” he said. “We’re looking at temperature, humidity levels, light levels. We’re looking at the amount of moisture and the product to make sure we’re not using too much water. We’re trying to be as efficient with everything that we possibly can.”

All of this will produce one result, he said.

“You’re going to see probably the largest greens, lettuce, kale, chard production in the state, with the most efficient systems,” he said. “Then we’ll be able to layer in the tomatoes and cucumbers as we go. But, one of the best values for our customers, it’s going to be the best-tasting value on the market.”

No one else is developing a controlled-agricultural operation at this scale, Waxman said.

“Generally, you’ll have a small-farm operation; maybe, they’ll self-distribute with one truck,” she said. “They’ll go to local restaurants, do farm-to-table events. But this is a very large operation. In fact, we’re told it will be the largest operation of its kind in the southeast U.S.”

The marketplace also will offer fresh produce picked daily, as well as classes to learn about an enriched and healthier way of life — making The Villages Grown a true farm-to-table experience.

“My hope is that residents see, smell, taste and feel such a difference with these nutrient-dense products that they will seek them out,” Manly said. “The Villages Grown team has been hard at work developing relationships that will result in the products and ingredients being available to Villagers almost anywhere they turn throughout the community.”

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