

Something's Always Blooming at Union Grove

Group works with Veterans to plant, maintain gardens at Veterans Home **By Chris Bucher**

Bill Bradley has never been the type who's afraid of getting his hands dirty. Growing up on a dairy farm in Michigan, Bradley, a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran, has always been the hands-on type.

As a member at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at Union Grove for the past three years, Bradley has been given a chance to reignite that passion. And it's brought an ear-to-ear grin to his face.

Bradley is one of several Veterans living at Fairchild Hall who help maintain multiple gardens on campus with the guidance and leadership of the Master Gardener Program. It's a therapeutic horticulture program administered by the Racine County UW-Extension in partnership with the Racine-Kenosha Master Gardener Association.

"I really love this gardening," Bradley said, pointing to a pile of ripe tomatoes while pulling weeds. "It gets me outside and help plant some things and it keeps me busy."

Each week, volunteers from the program come to the Veterans Home and spend a few hours planting and maintaining the gardens with the Veteran members. It's one of several projects the Master Gardener Program works on, but it's easily the most rewarding, volunteer Jo Ann Schulz said.

"I love it," she said. "How could you not want to give back the folks who put their lives on the line for us?"

The volunteer-based project began in 2014 with a grant from The Home Depot for Veteran-related projects. But the grant money covered just one year of the initial landscaping project and the future was unclear. It was the satisfying nature of the work that kept volunteers from the Master Gardener Program coming back year after year despite the circumstances.

In recent years, materials and resources have either been donated or have been part of separate grants. The tireless work and promising results haven't only formed new garden islands around Fairchild Hall. It's also touched



the hearts and provided a calming feeling for members.

"They're really good people and are putting in a lot of new stuff here," Bradley said.

While one of the objectives of the project is to maintain the gardens on campus, it also works as a means of therapy for some members at the home.

For Bill Wilms, a Navy and Army Veteran from Neenah, gardening has been a life-long adventure. Wilms, a Union Grove member for more than a year, spent many hours gardening as a child and worked as a grower for a florist for five years after his military service concluded. He said that he's donated flowers to the Master Gardeners in the past and helps maintain at least one flower bed on campus.

"I was put on this Earth to help people and I've been doing that all my life," he said. "This past spring, one of the guys was planting his own tomatoes, so I was helping him out with that ... if I can help someone do something, I'll be there."

Druann Snavelly, a U.S. Navy Veteran and military spouse, is one of the Master Gardeners who volunteers at the home. She said that one of the reasons she was drawn to the program was being able to spend time with our eldest nation's heroes.

"I like to give back and listen to them tell their stories," Snavelly said. "It's a lot of fun because it lights up their faces when you stop and listen to their stories. Some of them aren't interested in the garden so much as stopping and talking to someone."

The Master Gardeners typically visit the Veterans Home at Union Grove every week on Thursdays.

Visit WIMasterGardener.org for more information about this unique group.