

Make your own island



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DEENA LONZO

This Common Gallinule is enjoying the natural habitat that the floating island in Venice Gardens has created.

It cleans water, makes habitat

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How did an oncology nurse and a retired Boeing engineer end up being the self-appointed stewards of the 68.84 acres of water area within their south Venice neighborhood?

"We wanted to improve the water quality of the lakes in Venice Gardens, and enhance the wildlife habitat," said Deena Lonzo.

Lonzo and her husband Richard started a project to do just that, and are inviting the public to come and see it in action at their home today (Saturday).

She said that they had seen a study Sarasota County had conducted in 2014, which found that their neighborhood's bodies of water contained extremely high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus. Those two primary nutrients in excessive amounts can pollute lakes and streams, causing algae blooms and fish and plant kills.

The Lonzos, who have lived in their Venice Gardens home for almost five years, began to research ways that they could

help to reverse, or at least improve, the pollution trend of the neighborhood's waters.

Venice Gardens Lake itself is located within the Lemon Bay Watershed, a 74.5-square-mile area that drains water, sediment and dissolved materials to a common receiving outlet, Lemon Bay.

"We had looked at trying an aeration system, but it couldn't be done in this large of a body

of water," Lonzo said. "Then we researched floating islands, and we decided to go with Beemats, because it was within the realm of us being able to get a grant from the Charlotte Harbor Natural Estuary Program."

A floating island is basically an islands of plants, floating on mats, that can be built to

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The floating island is a 256-square-foot mat, which has been plugged with plants.

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any size and shape. As the plants grow, the excess nutrients in the water are taken up and stored in their tissues. Periodic harvesting of the mature plants, and replanting them along the shoreline, prevents the stored nutrients from re-entering the water when the plants die and decompose.

Beemats fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, allowing them to be customized to fit into certain spaces. The one in Venice Gardens is 256 square feet.

The Charlotte Harbor Natural Estuary Program (CHNEP) has supported more than 800 projects since 1998 with grants designed to help the recipients protect the natural environment from Venice to Bonita Springs to Winter Haven, and protect and restore the greater Charlotte Harbor estuarine system and watershed.

Lonzo said that she and her husband were able to get their floating island project off the ground with the grant money they received from CHNEP, but now that the island is anchored in the Venice Gardens Lake and exhibiting its effectiveness, other people are getting excited about helping to expand the effort.

"We are hoping to put several more mats into the lake," she said. "There are some people here who are looking into getting a Sarasota

Neighborhood grant to do it."

Certainly, the scope of the floating island project falls within the guidelines of the county's Neighborhood Services program, which offers grants to neighborhoods that are willing to match funding through cash, in-kind donations, professional labor or volunteer hours.

Resident and homeowners associations, or ad hoc groups of

neighbors who notice a need for improvement, are eligible to apply.

As part of the requirements of the CHNEP grant that helped to purchase the first Beemat, the Lonzos have a responsibility of helping to educate the community about their project's purpose.

To that end, the couple plans to host a public viewing of the floating island and provide educational information on practices that



The Lonzos received a grant from the Charlotte Harbor Natural Estuary Program to help fund their floating island project.

can improve the area waterways. Members of the CHNEP board will be on hand to answer any additional questions.

"We're trying to get people stimulated and interested about caring for their shoreline," Lonzo said. "We'd like to then do other things, like creating bird islands, too."

The viewing is this Saturday, March 26, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Lonzo's home, at 1652 Juniper Drive in Venice, and there will be binoculars available for viewing wildlife and the island from their dock. For more information, visit the blog about their project, at venicegardensfloatingisland.blogspot.com.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DEENA LONZO

A wood duck visits the natural habitat that the floating island in Venice Gardens has created.

Source: Venice Gondolier,
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