

Join the Landscape and Garden Club September 1 for gardening advice at all levels. The club will be headed by Rondi Niles and her committee of dedicated, knowledgeable gardeners, horticulturalists and landscape specialists.

By **JOSEPH FRANCIS**
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Those interested in getting their feet wet and their thumbs green will have a new forum to turn during its next meeting.

The Landscape and Garden Club, a long standing fixture for horticulturalists and gardeners of every skill level recently came under the leadership of Rondi Niles, of the Village of Pine Hills, and a dedicated committee including media liaison Connie Soukup, of the Village of Charlotte. The club is having its next meeting at 1 p.m. Sept. 1 at Rohan Recreation. It is open to all Villages residents.

“We try to get speakers that will help residents make their gardens all they can

be,” Soukup said. “Almost all of our members come from somewhere else. Here, winter isn’t the same as they might be used to, and so knowing what grows well and how to take care of it year-round is a whole new ballgame.”

Soukup, who hails from Nebraska, first got into

gardening thanks to her grandma.

“I’ve done it most of my life, but I started by helping my grandmother, following her around, and picking up tidbits of wisdom here are there,” she said.

Now, it’s a form of therapy for Soukup. Pruning became a time for pondering, raking a time for rumination or a way to handle negative reactions like being in a bad mood.

“It’s quiet,” she said. “I get to work on my own, and I do it when I’m in the mood — although it’s not hard for me to be in the mood. If you enjoy it, you don’t think of it as work.”

Gardening, Niles said, means something different to everyone. Hence, she hopes the club helps attendees across a wide range of needs.

“We’re going to talk cold damage in the winter and holiday plants in December,” she said. “Our first meeting, I will present on 10 things to know to be a successful gardener in The Villages. We’re going to try to be well-rounded.”

The group also is moving farther south than its previous

iteration, to hopefully cast a wider net of interested gardeners.

The club has been around for 12 years now, and another long standing feature has been a table in the back for sharing clippings, buds, or other byproducts of pruning that can be used for new growth.

“If you have a plant that gets too big, you can take a division of it, label it and leave it on the back table,” Niles said. “Members can take whatever they want, and try taking care of a plant they wouldn’t

otherwise.” A few rare specimens find their way into owners gardens this way, and Soukup says it’s an affordable way to get into gardening.

“Tended up with a night blooming cereus, a cactus or succulent that — as the name suggests — only blooms at night,” she said. “A huge flower opens up if you’re lucky enough to see it, and the next morning it’s gone.”

Niles hopes to see a few new faces in September, if only because that’s what makes this all worth it to her.

“I call myself a plantaholic, but it really is the people too,” she said. “While teaching classes, I once tried setting up a page so people could buy items for a fairy garden off my website, but I found that I didn’t enjoy it because there was no interaction. That’s what this group is all about — sharing knowledge.”



Connie Soukup, of the Village of Charlotte, and member of the Landscape and Garden Club works on a beautyberry shrub, while at her home.

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