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Bok Gardens Nature Trail Opens Onto Pine Land Preserve

By GREG PARIER
Ledger Media Group Correspondent
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LAKE WALES | Nestled among citrus and pine, a new preserve trail at Bok Tower Gardens provides a portal to a landscape rich in serene nature.

The 1.5-mile trail winds through part of 260 acres of open lands surrounding Bok Tower Gardens preserved by the Green Horizon Land Trust.

"The open agriculture and pine lands around Bok Tower Gardens are important to preserving the historic design and beauty of the garden laid out by Fredrick Law Olmsted Jr.," David Price, president of Bok Tower Gardens, said during the trail's dedication ceremony Friday.



Price

The Florida Community Trust awarded a \$2.5 million grant to the Green Horizon Land Trust, an environmental preservation organization focused on the Lake Wales Ridge and surrounding areas, to preserve the land as "vistas critically important to the historic design of the Gardens."

"If you look out from the gardens, some of the beauty of the landscape is the open groves and fields," Price said. "The other thing is we have a lot of wildlife, and the open land is a wildlife corridor. If you have homes and fences and dogs and cats it would impact the wildlife."

During the development boom of the early 2000s, there was a movement to alter the covenant signed by owners of the land surrounding Bok Tower Gardens to potentially open up some of the land for development.

That's when the Gardens began looking in to ownership as a way to preserve the scenic vistas its visitors had enjoyed for decades, Price said.

The Green Horizon Land Trust stepped in to buy the land, and partnered with Bok Tower Gardens to maintain the land.

In the agreement, Bok Tower will restore 156 of the 260 acres of former agricultural land to longleaf pine forest. Some of the preserve will remain in citrus production, and the rest of the land is in its native natural state.

Two picnic shelters are on the preserve, one at the trail head near the entrance to the Gardens and the other at Lake Wales High School overlooking the Preserve and Bok Tower, where faculty can conduct classes in a unique outdoor setting.

Ten signs along the trail, which ends at Bok Tower Gardens' visitors center, tell

about the natural history of the preserve and the Lake Wales Ridge.

The Florida Wildflower Foundation provided a \$3,000 grant to the project for the planting of thousands of native wildflowers along the trail, and Mosaic Corporation provided the rock trail, rich in fossils from its phosphate mines.

Additionally, 71 volunteers from the Ridge Rangers, a group focused on helping restore and support the Lake Wales Ridge ecosystem, Boy Scouts and other community members spent six days and 370 hours planting more than 13,000 wildflowers and native grasses on a 1-acre area surrounding the Preserve's picnic shelter and trailhead.

"Without the support of these dedicated volunteers, it would have been difficult to complete such a large task," said Bok land steward Katrina Noland. "Not only were these volunteers able to make a lasting impact on the environment, they also received a firsthand education and experienced the nature of this threatened ecosystem."

CSX, the Vaughn-Jordan Foundation, the Florida Wildflower Advisory Council, Polk County Parks and Natural Resources, the City of Lake Wales and the Lake Wales Chamber of Commerce also contributed to the project.

Hikers may encounter numerous species of wildlife, including foxes, bobcats, gopher tortoises, birds and raptors that make these open lands their home. Some of the wildlife that lived in the Gardens has moved back into the Preserve, their native habitat, since Bok began restoring the pine forest.

"Probably the biggest impact is the feeling and the mood, the ambiance of the place," Price said.

The public can access the trail as part of the admission price to Bok Tower Gardens and part of the ticket price will go to maintenance and restoration of the Preserve.

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