

NEWS

Ian tore up their farm, she broke her wrist after storm, yet Bokeelia couple perseveres gratefully



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After decades of work, Donna and Gary Schneider were living their dream: coaxing delicious, beautiful exotica from their Bokeelia farm in the middle of Florida's last agricultural island, the largest in Florida.

Until Hurricane Ian.

Its winds tore through Pine Island Tropicals, the Schneiders' 11 lush acres, lauded by Martha Stewart herself. It splintered and uprooted plants, blew apart buildings and destroyed their irrigation system. Some places on the property remain impassible.

"Over there was a total jungle of heliconias and gingers," Gary said. "But we can't even get back there yet."

And then came the salt in the wound: A few days after the storm, as Donna was carrying the family's first hot meal up the stairs (they were without power for 15 days), she tripped, probably because she hadn't eaten all day, she thinks.

The fall dislocated her elbow and broke her wrist, sidelining her at the worst possible time. Yet her frustration centered on the fact that she couldn't be there

for others, the “helplessness because I cannot do anything for my family and friends.”

That ethic is central to Donna Schneider’s character. She’s the kind of person who’ll take to Facebook in search of a backhoe to help her newly widowed neighbor – whose husband died three days post-Ian, likely from the stress – scrape up a storm-felled metal building so she can have a celebration of life for him. Dec. 2, 3 and 4, broken wrist and all, she’ll be at Tarpon Lodge’s Holiday House, a fundraiser for island nonprofit Beacon of Hope selling her canned and jarred Momma Donna’s delicacies.

She and Gary embody the adage about farmers being the salt of the earth, in the classic sense of being plain good folk. At the same time, they’re anything but salty in the contemporary sense, though they have every right to be. Never mind the storm turmoil, the broken wrist, the loss of livelihood and uncertainty about what – if any – help they’ll get, they’re still thankful, despite all the adversity.

The two are respected elders in the community, selling the fruits (and vegetables) of their labor at the palm-thatched farm stand they share with FruitScapes Nursery on the main drag, Stringfellow Road.

More: Pine Island Tropicals fruit stand

More: Video: Pine Island Tropicals

The unique collaboration (and truly splendid produce and preserves) caught Martha Stewart’s eye, and in 2016, the Schneiders and FruitScapes owners Steve Cucura and Jesse Avalos were honored as American Made Award winners and featured in an article in her magazine.

‘It was solid trees’

The destruction is enough to make a tropical foodie weep: Mango varieties like Palmers, Valencias and Cotton Candy; coconuts, black sapotes, cacao, turmeric,

lychees, avocados, citrus, bananas, sea grapes, 30 varieties of sugar cane and more.

“You couldn’t see anything because it was solid trees,” Gary said.

“They were so thick, I couldn’t drive a cart in between them. I had to walk.”

Plus organic veggies: Asian yard-long beans, daikon, pak choi, mustards, some varieties of lettuce, purple carrots and more, not planted this year because the storm took out their irrigation pump plus the 3,000 feet of underground water lines it supplied.

And the exquisite ornamentals Donna once used to craft stunning arrangements: heliconias, gingers, flowering bromeliads.

Statewide, food producers' post-storm losses are estimated upwards of \$1.56 billion, according to an initial assessment released by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences last month.

The Schneiders are some of the local faces of that devastation. “Basically, our income is gone,” Gary said.

Take a look: One month after Hurricane Ian, Pine Islands displays immense recovery

Also: Pine Island residents, businesses share progress of rebuilding one month post-Hurricane Ian

On the island since 1980, they started their farm as a moonlight venture in 1992. Both were still working full-time – Donna at Burnt Store Marina and Gary building homes and repairing boats, but they loved hybridizing hibiscus, growing heliconias, gingers, bromeliads, mangos and organic winter vegetables.

Fifteen years ago, they joined forces with FruitScapes, just up the road, and as part of their partnership, began selling fruit, produce and her Momma Donna’s products, canned and pickled products from the farm.

It's never been easy, but the rewards have been priceless, they say. Six years ago, they were able to take in two grandchildren, then 5 and 7, after their mom, Donna's daughter, got into trouble. "Sometimes it's a lot for our age (he's 72; she's 67)," she said, "But we didn't even discuss it – we just said, 'When can we get them?' "They now have full custody and are raising them in the octagonal stilt house they built on their land where they rode out the storm with the kids and their blue heeler, Jade.

"I mean, we've been in hurricanes all our life, including Category 4," Donna said. "But we never expected this," added Gary. They're sure the home's octagonal design saved it. But for a few pieces of siding and soffit, it's in great shape. They're thankful for that.

'Those trees were one of a kind'

Over the years, Pine Island Tropicals has been likened to the famed Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota: a jungle filled with earthly delights.

"People would come out here and say it was comparable to Selby," Gary said. "We didn't have the display house, but we had the diversity."

No more. The once leafy, dense shade is gone, the trees that provided it now scattered in broken tangles across the acreage.

Gary had to cut a tunnel through flattened African mahogany trees to get to their downed mangoes, many rare and venerable specimens. Normally, Donna would have been working alongside him, but now she's down an arm.

What troubles her most: "I cannot cook, provide clothing, offer my help in clean-up or even start to think about trying to save our own nursery."

And the nursery needs a lot of saving. The couple estimates they lost almost 90% of their plants, many irreplaceable. Imagine what it feels like to have tucked a baby tree into the earth decades ago, cared for it, watched as it began flowering, then fruiting. Then imagine how it feels to see that tree and all its siblings stripped, shattered, uprooted.

Read more: 5 things to know about Pine Island

Also: The Florida that's disappearing: forests and farms, fruit groves and green pastures

: Should I stay or should I go? When growth chases Floridians away

"A lot of those trees were one of a kind," Gary said, shaking his head. "That big stump you see there? That was a mango tree. That big pile you see there? That was our vegetable garden."

"We had two wooden bench houses that came down," Donna said, pointing to a crumpled ruin. "We had three hoop houses over there."

Many of their trees were like brood mares – the parent stock of baby trees created by air layering, a propagation method. Now, wadded foil packets that would have been the start of new trees spangle the ground.

Preserving 'God's gift to us'

But there's more to their story than one family's losses. Writ large, it illustrates what the region stands to lose, says their former Pine Island farming colleague Santiago De Choch. For decades, he and wife Millisa raised crops and small livestock near Saint James City while managing the Alliance for the Arts' Saturday farm market. He recently moved to less-developed Suwanee County, but is pulling hard for his former neighbors. Were the Schneiders and farmers like them to be driven off the island, a big piece of its soul would be lost, De Choch says.

"Anything we can do to make a stand, however small, against yet another part of Old Florida disappearing, is worth the effort," he said.

With no beaches and a robust fishing, farming and tree-growing economy, 17-mile long Pine Island was a rare food-producing hold-out in a rapidly urbanizing

county. After the storm's devastation, De Choch's hope is that "the remaining growers on the island, come back strong," he wrote in a Gainesville Sun essay.

But he's pragmatic. "Others will quit, like I did. They will see the difficulties of preserving their ways of life. They will receive 'offers they can't refuse' to buy their land from deep pocketed investors looking to build their second or third vacation home. Stricter building codes and higher utility bills will price many out of the area, and eventually, nearby Cape Coral will gobble it up, as it has been trying to do for years.

"Then, one of the last vestiges of the Florida that once was will be gone, 'improved' by mass development."

The result, he says: "More bureaucracy and regulation, land speculation, and ultimately, a wholesale assault on a worthy, time tested way of life. When only the digital and the financial are valued, Florida communities are impoverished, if not in dollar terms, certainly in sustainability, health, knowledge, and why not say it, in spirituality too. Religion is not just going through the motions at church on Sundays; it is also preserving and wisely working with, and not against, God's gift to us: Creation."

Yet the Schneiders are still grateful for that gift, and intend to celebrate it Thursday. The deck may seem steeply stacked against them, but they aren't giving up.

"You're in survival mode in the beginning," Donna said, "There's just way too much anxiety and stress in the beginning and you're ready to walk away and say, 'I'm done,' but once it kind of settles in a little bit and you realize, 'Oh, maybe I can save that.' ... Maybe you'll make decisions down the road, but I'm not ready to jump into that."

For one thing, they're not sure how much insurance help they'll get from the USDA-backed Farm Service, but they're not optimistic.

"That's a joke," she said. "We had Farm Service previously, and we had X amount guaranteed to us for our losses, but unfortunately the (office) sent the application to

Gainesville and somewhere along the line it got lost and they would not re-do the application because of their time constraint – even though it was their fault.” A call to the Lee County office requesting comment was not immediately returned.

After Ian, the company sent someone who said they should be able to qualify for help. “They were very blunt in telling me there’s only one person ... and she’s inundated. I called weeks ago and I still haven’t heard back from them.”

As Gary points out, “The whole state got hammered – the citrus industry, the cattle industry – all kinds.”

Even if they do reach someone, they’re not optimistic. “They don’t even give you wholesale value,” Gary said. So for now, they’re living off the recent sale of 5 acres. Had they not had it, “I’d go out and get another job again washing dishes or whatever it is I had to do,” Donna said.

Yet they feel fortunate. “Most of the farmers out here are uni-crop. We’re multi-crop. We do flowers and gingers, herbs, mangoes and vegetables,” he said. “That’s what’s kept us afloat all these years,” she added, “We diversified. We didn’t have all our eggs in one basket.”

And there have been hopeful glimmers. A rare cross-bred bromeliad Donna grew from a single cutting survived and is now flowering. “It’s like the one beauty left on the whole property and it’s blooming now,” she said.

A venerable Indian mulberry snapped off knee-high is starting to send up new shoots. Gloriosa lilies are booming under the pines. Braced-up mangoes are surviving. Gary points to a favorite. “I thought I was going to lose that tree – I cut a few branches off it, used a tractor. Stood it back up and put a load of soil on the roots, so hopefully” He trails off.

How many years do they reckon recovery will take? “Five to seven,” he said. “And I’m 72. Do I want to keep doing this?” he asks with a laugh. “But we’re stuck.”

Stuck but giving thanks. Sure, 2022's holiday will be different: This year, they're joining her parents, who live in Cape Coral, at Bob Evans.

"I didn't want to impose on them to come out here and to see this mess here, because they're elderly," Donna said. "It's going to be a very long-term process in order for us to recover (but) we're going to celebrate. Unfortunately, I can't cook and do all the fixings as normal," she said, gripping her cast-enclosed arm, "but yes, we are going to celebrate. We are thankful."

Learn more, help out

Beacon of Hope's 13th annual Holiday House of Hope, featuring local vendors, live entertainment and featured authors Marty Ambrose, D.L. Havlin and Martha Huard is from 5-9 p.m. Dec. 2, 4-9 p.m. Dec. 3 and 1-4 p.m. Dec. 4 at Tarpon Lodge, 3771 Waterfront Drive, Pineland. Details online: <https://beaconofhopepineisland.com/holiday-house>. Call [239-283-3999](tel:239-283-3999).

Starting Dec. 10, Momma Donna's products will be available at their retail location, the Pine Island Tropical Fruit Market at FruitScapes, 12870 Stringfellow Road, Bokeelia.

Pine Island Tropicals will need professional help to salvage trees and plants without damaging those that remain as well as plant new ones and install fencing. Donations can be sent to Pine Island Tropicals, 5443 Game Bird Lane, Bokeelia, Florida, 33922.

