

In Florida, 'Powerful Little Plants' That Protect From Big Storms

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A curious trend is underway in Southwest Florida. Young red mangroves trees, some with nicknames like Rosie, Penelope and Dingle, are being adopted and raised in backyard gardens, at restaurant host stands, beside bank teller windows and in school classrooms throughout Sanibel Island and the Fort Myers area.

Their purpose is an existential one for the state: to help buffer the fragile coastline from rising seas and increasingly ferocious storms.



damage during storms, which is of growing importance as climate change intensifies [hurricanes](#).

Last month, volunteers on Sanibel Island planted 500 red mangrove seedlings that had been nurtured by local residents over months, to help the community recover from recent storms.



The empty shoreline where volunteers worked in May was previously a thick mangrove wetland, before [Hurricane Ian](#) devastated the Fort Myers area in 2022.

The trees were wiped out by the storm, Florida's deadliest [in decades](#). More hurricanes, like [Milton](#) and [Helene](#) in 2024, followed, worsening the damage and slowing recovery. Some of the volunteers planting seedlings at Clam Bayou were residents whose homes were damaged





propagate. Planting as many sturdy seedlings as possible increases the odds of faster recovery, because not all of them will reach maturity.



"It's a numbers game when it comes to mangroves," said Kealy Pfau, who leads volunteer programs for the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation.



while also educating the community on the local importance of mangroves.

The process starts in the summer when healthy red mangroves drop propagules, which look like green beans



Potted propagules cared for by Susan Lloyd, a volunteer.
Photo by Susan Lloyd



The propagules grow into seedlings and are collected, potted and put up for adoption in the community. In the spring, seedlings that are sturdy enough are returned and planted at restoration sites.

Cheryl Day, a volunteer, described it as “giving nature a good jumpstart.” This was her third year as a “mangrove mama.” She has raised about 200 seedlings in the lush garden of her Fort Myers home.



“I’m a plant freak, so this is something I couldn’t help but do,” Ms. Day said.



Cassie Hill helped to care for a seedling at the Sanibel Recreation Center with children in the center’s after-school program.

Daniel Billheimer adopted a mangrove the day he reopened his restaurant, The Lighthouse Cafe of Sanibel Island, in a new space.

Hurricane Ian tore through the original building his family had operated for decades. He also lost his home in the storm. Neighbors rallied around him as he worked to reopen.

He said caring for the seedling felt like a “civic responsibility.”



"It's important for me to give back to the community that gave so much," Mr. Billheimer said.

Before Hurricane Ian, restoration focused on pockets of mangroves needing a boost. After the storm, many areas needed restoration. But with that need, the number of people wanting to participate also grew.

"When we started to see some of those areas slowly start to come back with some green leaves, it was such a symbol of resilience that I think the community needed to see," Ms. Pfau said.

Some volunteers named their seedlings and decorated their pots.



Almost 70 percent of Sanibel, a barrier island, is protected as conservation land. Joel Caouette, an environmental biologist with the City of Sanibel, said the city looked for “nature-based” solutions for living with storms, and had often partnered with the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation on the mangrove plantings, including this one at Clam Bayou.



Another planting site at Woodring Road on Sanibel Island.