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Volunteers create allure of tropics for seniors

By Neil Offen

DURHAM -- They swooped in.

More than 30 women from across the Triangle gathered in the Rigsbee Street front courtyard of the Council for Senior Citizens Saturday to dig, shovel, saw, hammer, measure and plant. They were members of SWOOP -- Strong Women Organizing Outrageous Projects -- and their outrageous project Saturday was to build in one day a tropical garden.

"A good garden has a theme," said Frank Hyman, who designed what the SWOOP members were building. "This is a Florida garden. Instead of having the retirees move to Florida, we thought we'd bring Florida to them."

That meant clearing the space, building the borders and planting nine windmill palms -- "they're very hardy," Hyman said -- six banana trees, three elephant ears, a banana shrub, a gardenia and a tea olive.

For the SWOOP workers, it wasn't that big a job.

"For us, this is one of the smaller projects we take on," said Jane Lubischer, president of the board of the non-profit organization which formed in the wake of the devastation caused by Hurricane Fran in the region more than a dozen years ago.

The group -- which now numbers more than 1,200 women -- takes on a project a month for nine months a year, providing community service through short-term labor. "Our goal is to help people in need through a spirit of cooperative sisterhood," said Lubischer. "We choose one-day projects because that way, at the end of the day, you can really see what you've accomplished, the differences you've made in someone's life."

The work helps build community and, Lubischer said, "you can really learn some skills, particularly in non-traditional areas for women."

Among other projects, SWOOP has refurbished the AIDS Community Residence Association home in Durham and built a meditation trail for The Healing Place in Wake County.

To accomplish their work in just a day, members of the group are highly organized, working under team leaders who work under a project manager.

Lisa Wilson, the project manager, oversaw the work on Saturday.

"Sue," Wilson called out to one of the women who was working on hammering into the garden borders. "The holes are in the other direction."

Wilson was pleased, however, with how the work was going.

"We're right on schedule," she said around mid-day. "We should be finished by no later than 5." Meanwhile, Georgie Searles raked some dirt.

She had heard about SWOOP through her giving circle at Durham's Eno River Unitarian Universalist Church.

"I was so impressed by what they were doing," she said. "I felt I just had to join, and I'm so glad I did."