

# The Grand Hotel Resort has a secret ... garden

By DOOLEY BERRY

The vast, welcoming grounds of the Grand Hotel Resort at Point Clear are already well known for the outstanding horticultural delights that greet hotel visitors along the meandering drives and pathways from the front gate all the way to Mobile Bay. Perhaps less well known and tucked bayside along the restaurants windows, is an outstanding chef's kitchen garden, which not only supplies the resort's restaurant kitchen with fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables, but also provides a charming location for guests to enjoy contemplative, sweet-smelling walks on an afternoon when the wind is up.

This scenic, fully-functioning kitchen garden thrives under the creative talents of Katherine Wootan, the culinary gardener who serves as the liaison between the horticulture department and the excellent chefs of the Grand. Hotel chefs Brian Young, Cory Garrison and Gregory Baker take full advantage of Wootan's fresh ingredients to create healthy and delicious food for their hungry and health-conscious guests.

Wootan proudly proclaims that she is an adventurous gardener. "I find a way to use every herb and plant in

the garden," she says. "We had a much smaller garden before, but executive chef Cory wanted to enlarge it, so we are up to eight large raised beds."

The kitchen garden, under Wootan's capable hands, is focused on growing a diverse range of organic heirloom vegetables, herbs, edible flowers, fruits and honey. The garden provides produce for the hotel's restaurants year-round.

"I grow as much as possible from seed," Wootan says. "I am actually a gardening nerd. I am always studying and reading about new ways to grow and use kitchen plants."

That magical relationship between Wootan and the Grand's chefs is the heart of all the deliciousness that happens in the hotel's kitchen.

The key to a successful dining experience at the Grand is the dedication of world-class chefs to creating recipes imbued with the vibrancy of fresh, organic produce which Wootan picks each morning. Whether fresh greens for tasty salads, baby vegetables or numerous fruits and seasonal berries and melons - all are included as a constant source of tasty inspiration for the chefs. Wootan, with her progressive growing techniques, creates the daily fresh produce that



PHOTO BY DOOLEY BERRY

Grand Hotel's culinary gardener, Katherine Wootan and Chef Brian Young choose the day's fresh produce for the hotel kitchen.

provides the core ingredients for dish development.

This is the ultimate in practical gardening - growing fruits, vegetables, herbs and edible flowers right outside the hotel's doors. What could be healthier or tastier than stepping just outside, harvesting the freshest and most flavorful produce, and then creating delicious dishes to be enjoyed by the hotel's guests?

Wootan is always looking for new and unusual plants to include in the hotel's garden. Among the more typical lettuces, kale and arugula, she includes large clumps of lemongrass, bush beans, fava beans, chard, semi-melon pumpkins and tiger melons, which create a heady melon fragrance in the air that smells like a favorite perfume.

"We have satsumas, lemons, raspberries, blueberries and figs

growing on the grounds," Wootan said. "Nothing tastes better, whether at home or in a nice hotel like ours, than cooking fresh, sun-ripened produce just picked from the garden. We grow lots of heirloom tomatoes, like Brandywine and Everglades, a tiny cherry tomato from Florida. What the chefs don't use in the kitchen we fashion into garden centerpieces for the tables in the restaurants."

"What we harvest from the garden is kind of like the "catch of the day." We use as much as possible each day and the chefs work with whatever the garden produces on a daily basis. Menus change seasonally."

Even before the hotel had its own garden, the Grand, for over three centuries, has always used ingredients in its kitchens that are grown locally. Their famed signature gumbo, well loved

by employees of over 50 years, was always made with locally grown ingredients.

Guests and visitors at the hotel are welcome to visit the kitchen garden during their stay. If Wootan is out and about in the garden, she will probably clip off and offer a taste of catnip or borage to the lucky visitor.

Chef Bryan Young shares, with excitement, one of the hotel's new culinary endeavors.

"We are producing and fermenting right here, over 400 pounds of Fresno peppers and packaging up our own bottled hot sauce!" he says. (This writer can vouch for the taste. It is delicious!)

A meaningful and romantic tradition can be planned and executed right in the Grand's kitchen garden. Overlooking the herb garden and the gorgeous

Mobile Bay sunsets, a secret garden hideaway can be reserved for any special dining occasion. A private outdoor table and menu for two can be customized to ensure an evening never to be forgotten. Call the hotel to find more information about this incredible offering.

During these months of summer, Wootan's choices of fresh berries, melons, broccoli, kale and thyme add a delicious and creative garden touch to many dishes on the menu. Delicate and delightful to behold, colorful flowers and herbal leaves may find their way into salad and cocktail selections.

Plan a visit to the Grand Hotel Resort soon and see for yourself how the history of Southern tradition and good taste continues to thrive in its culinary garden and restaurants on into the 21st century.

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