

Easterseals Southwest Florida
Bringing the Magic of Gardening to Children, Teens, and Adults with Disabilities

To better support their mission to provide exceptional services for persons with disabilities and their families across a lifetime by empowering individuals to live their lives to the fullest, Easterseals Southwest Florida proposes their **Bringing the Magic of Gardening to Children, Teens, and Adults with Disabilities** initiative. This initiative is for the development of a new, wheelchair accessible Grow and Learn Garden, where the 1,300 clients they serve will have experiences in nature that augment their work in class, therapies, and other trainings.

The Grow and Learn Garden will be fully funded by the \$109,000 Impact100 SRQ grant as follows: construction of the new garden and storage shed at \$48,000; trailer and utility vehicle at \$30,000; supporting staff at \$18,500; and other combined project expenses including curriculum material, benches, tables, work stations, and a sunshade at \$12,500.

To be used by clients from Easterseals' Lily Preschool, K-12 Academy, and the Adult Program, the Grow and Learn Garden will be a means for these children, teens, and adults with intellectual and/or physical disabilities to achieve improved moods and decreased anxiety through the therapeutic benefits of outdoor gardening. Clients will experience improved self-esteem from learning new skills. Garden-based lessons and curriculum will provide nutrition education while supporting fine and gross motor skill development. The produce from the Garden will then become a healthy addition to meals at Easterseals, creating additional kitchen learning opportunities for clients.

Gardening, food and nutrition will be built into educational curriculum and lesson plans weekly. As therapists, doctors, teachers, parents, and caregivers meet to discuss clients' progress toward therapeutic and education goals, they will use reports of gains made to understand the impact of the garden program in the progress each client makes.

With the Impact100 SRQ grant funding the staff, plantings, and maintenance to the garden for the first 24 months, Easterseals will have time to engage with donors interested in sustaining the garden activities and to include the garden needs in future budgets. Local farmers, volunteers, caregivers, staff and client families have offered hands on help once the garden is in place and growing.

The Grow and Learn Garden project will become another Easterseals program that will move clients toward independence and help them live rewarding and fulfilling lives. When clients thrive, their families and caregivers benefit not only from their loved ones' practical gains but also from positive interactions, leading to an improvement in the entire family's mental health.