

The Free Lance-Star



By Cathy Dyson

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Belle Grove gets some helping hands



Photo by Clara Brabo

Members of the King George Community helped do some landscaping around Belle Grove Plantation on Saturday.

Michelle and Darnell are opening a bed-and-breakfast at Belle Grove, the birthplace of President James Madison. They had a truckload of items coming Saturday morning and needed help with the planting.

Supervisor Ruby Brabo put out a Facebook request on Friday asking for help. On Saturday, 17 residents, including some from Richmond and Chesapeake, showed up to unload the flatbed, then begin the chore of planting cherry trees and hydrangea bushes, roses and peonies.

“We are just so overwhelmed with the turnout,” Michelle Darnell said. “It only makes us more excited to be here and to be opening this beautiful Southern plantation to the public again.”

After the truck was unloaded, Brabo said Michelle Darnell “rewarded the group” with a tour of the house.

The Darnells had purchased hundreds of shrubs, plants and bushes as part of their primary landscaping. They got about a third of the plants and trees in the ground, with the help of the volunteers.

The Darnells had hoped to open their B&B, which is off U.S. 301 near the Port Royal bridge, in March in time for Madison’s birthday. But they were delayed in getting their special exception from the King George Board of Supervisors and have faced other delays as they’ve tried to get the 18th-century plantation ready for visitors.

They don’t own the property, but have a lease to operate from the owners, the Austrian company Franz Haas Machinery.

The Darnells are hoping to open the facility by mid-July. But even before then, Belle Grove plans to participate with the Fourth of July celebration at Port Royal, which is just over the bridge from Belle Grove.

The plantation will be open from 2 to 6 p.m. for guided tours. There is no charge, but donations will benefit the restoration of the 18th-century summer kitchen, ice house and smoke house.

Those interested in tours may advance register by emailing the Darnells at virginiaplantation@gmail.com. Walk ins Welcome on July 4th.