



Ike spread fruit, flower, vegetable seeds

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GALVESTON — Hurricane Ike's storm surge smothered lawns, stripped shrubs and left thousands of island trees for dead when it swept ashore last year.

But the sludge-filled floodwaters deposited an unexpected consolation for Galveston residents mourning the loss of their greenery.

As soon as spring's warmer weather could coax new growth from the barren landscape, volunteer fruits, vegetables, trees and flowers started to sprout in yards all across the island. The seeds were scattered to their new spots by the unstoppable surge.

Tiny grape tomatoes and melon plants are the most common addition to the island's landscape.

Although his tomato vines withered in the August heat, Burke Evans is waiting anxiously to harvest several watermelons and a cantaloupe. The fruit, cupped by colorful plaid bras, hangs from vines that staked their claim to his front yard several months ago.

Evans, who lives in the 1100 block of Postoffice Street, was surprised and delighted when he discovered the additions to his garden.

"When I realized I'd lost my trees, I needed something to cheer me up," he said.

Ike also left Evans beds of periwinkles, several papaya trees and a few elephant ears, plants he tried unsuccessfully to grow before the storm.

While the more common plants probably came from other island yards, Evans thinks the tiny tomatoes might have come all the way from the Caribbean.

"Other people out here on the East End have had that same little tomato," he said. "No one recognized it, and then I heard by word of mouth that they had come from Cuba. I'm willing to believe that, but I don't know that it's true."

Experts cannot verify Evans' claim, but the unknown origin of the volunteer plants hasn't kept gardeners from enjoying them.

Pam Gilbert, who lives in the 1600 block of Ball Street, had jalapeños in her yard earlier this year and now is enjoying petunias popping up in colors she never planted before and in places she never planted them. She's also reveling in a Mulberry tree that already is 9 feet tall. Gilbert values the tree even more because it's one of the only ones on the block that's green.

Hurricane Ike killed about 40,000 trees on the island, three-quarters of which are on private property.

"It's just been fun," Gilbert, one of Galveston County's Master Gardeners, said. "It made us all happy to see something live come up. It was serendipitous."

Hurricane Ike was not the only storm to scatter seeds in its wake last year. Hurricane Dolly spread cotton seeds all over the Rio Grande Valley.

But officials with AgriLife, the state's extension service, are not as pleased with Dolly's gifts as island gardeners are with Ike's. Experts fear the unattended cotton plants soon will be home to a bumper crop of boll weevils, a beetle that feeds on cotton buds and flowers and can destroy entire crops.

Although horticulturalists in the Rio Grande Valley know exactly where their unwanted cotton plants came from, island gardeners are still trying to unravel the origin of some of Ike's deposits.

Many of the less exotic plants might not have moved farther than a few houses.

Gilbert is sure some of her elephant ears ended up in her neighbor's yard.

But no one, except Evans, has an explanation for the unique and prolific tomato plants.

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