

Winter Garden

‘Modern-day Mayberry’ in central Florida charms with small-town ambience, easy access to Disney attractions

By Alan Macher

When retirees who settle in Winter Garden, FL, explain why they selected this city on the southeast shore of Lake Apopka, west of Orlando, they often repeat this refrain: It reminds them of the small town where they grew up.

With a population of about 30,000 spread across 17 square miles, Winter Garden will continue to incorporate its character and small-town appeal into future growth, says City Manager Mike Bollhoefer. This once sleepy citrus community still uses the slogan: “A charming little city with a juicy past.”

Visitors can capture a slice of Winter Garden’s life, past and present, on a walk along brick-lined Plant Street in the restored historic district. The old-fashioned ambience is reflected in the clock tower, gracing the entrance to downtown, while a nearby water fountain features orange crate labels re-created in mosaic tiles, representing the city’s former citrus industry.

Along both sides of Plant Street, quaint shops and restaurants draw local residents along with day visitors, including those who venture from the theme parks and attractions in Orlando, about 15 miles east. Indeed, at newly opened Axum Coffee, Bollhoefer marvels at the number of international tourists he



Just outside Winter Garden, Oakland Park is a certified green community with homes designed to evoke the feel of Old Florida.

meets when he stops by mornings on his way to work.

Winter Garden’s look and feel of a friendly community appeals to Dick and Terry Johnson, who moved into their home in November 2010. Both 63, the Johnsons relocated from Lititz, PA, in Lancaster County, a place also recognized for its charm, historic downtown, unique shops and spots to relax and unwind.

“Winter Garden is very much like our former hometown,” says Dick, as he and his wife enjoy a late-morning breakfast in one of their favorite downtown eateries, Sweet Traditions Bakery & Cafe. “There is always stuff going on, from arts and crafts shows, car shows

and a farmers market to live music in Centennial Park.”

Dick was a state trooper, then an investigator with the Pennsylvania State Police. Terry had a career as an abuse counselor in the city of Lancaster. The couple met while studying a case together. When Dick retired in 1998 after 25 years with the state police, he began doing private investigation work. And later the Johnsons became snowbirds, as Dick describes it, spending winter vacations in Florida. “This gave us an opportunity to travel around and check out communities,” he says.

They purchased a home in the Garden Heights neighborhood. With four children between them — Terry has three and Dick has one — and seven



Downtown action centers around Plant Street, the historic district's main drag, which has quaint shops, two museums, a Saturday farmers market and community get-togethers.

AMY MARTELO CITY OF WINTER GARDEN



Sandy Schupp helps new residents get to know Winter Garden through an over-50 social club in her neighborhood, Stoneybrook West.

grandchildren, there is plenty of room for family visits. “It’s perfect,” says Dick, describing the four-bedroom, two-bath home with a swimming pool and large screened porch. “And we even have a lake view from a part of the property.”

Another transplant, Sandy Schupp combines her enthusiasm for golf and small-town life at her residence in Stoneybrook West, a gated neighborhood less than a 10-minute drive from downtown Winter Garden. Sandy, 67, stays involved in the community. “I’m always trying to retire, but they keep finding new projects for me to do,” she laughs. “I’m constantly volunteering for something.”

Besides working on various local committees, she also oversees the Stoneybrook West Over 50 social club. In its few years of existence, the group has grown from about 20 members to more than 140 and hosts monthly events such as dinners, game nights, boat trips and visits to museums and other attractions. “The club is a good icebreaker, a place where new residents can socialize and feel comfortable,” she says.

Sandy, who has been divorced for many years, was born in Salem, MA, grew up in Danvers, MA, and moved with her family to Madeira, OH, a suburb of Cincinnati, when her dad transferred with General Electric Co. Later, she began a career as a real estate agent in Worthington, OH, outside Columbus, relocating to Winter Garden

KRISTINA RENEE COOK



The town has become a foodie haven with an eclectic collection of popular restaurants, from a French-style bakery to a Thai eatery.

AMY MARTELOCCIO OF WINTER GARDEN

in 2006. "I've always lived in small towns within proximity to bigger cities. It's a lifestyle that I cherish," she says.

Now a part-time retiree, Sandy still markets real estate for Main Street Realty International in nearby Windermere and works during the summer as a cashier at Downtown Disney, an entertainment, dining and shopping area at Walt Disney World. She's also a substitute teacher at a local Montessori school.

Sandy is enthusiastic about Stoneybrook West because the golf course is public, the amenities, including the pool and clubhouse, are outstanding and it's near all of the things she enjoys.

"I don't need the ocean, I need the sun and water," Sandy says. And her home is spacious enough that she can say to her three children and four grandchildren up North, "Come on down." Her four-bedroom, three-bath home overlooks a man-made lake and the 11th hole of the golf course.

Sandy also likes Stoneybrook West because it is not a 55-plus neighborhood. "In the event I want to sell my home someday, I want to be able to market it to a diverse age group," she says. She describes Winter Garden as a very welcoming community, one where it is easy to network and get involved. "You don't have to be born here to fit in," she says.

City Manager Bollhoefer acknowledges that residents enjoy the proximity to Orlando, with its famous attractions, international airport and medical and other professional services. But he

emphasizes that Winter Garden is not just a bedroom community for commuters to Orlando. "We are a self-sustaining city providing all the services that residents need," he says. Amenities include Health Central's comprehensive medical complex in neighboring Ocoee and the Winter Garden Village at Fowler Groves open-air shopping center near downtown.

Area native Rod Reeves, 70, a retired schoolteacher, can provide a better sense of Winter Garden's past and present. His family was among the first to settle in the city. His mother, Mae, arrived in 1923 from Georgia and his father, Dock, in 1920 from Alabama. His dad was the town barber for nearly 50 years and his mom a telephone operator for 27 years — back in the "number please" days. Both occupations helped them get to know almost everyone in town.

Rod, whose nickname is "Mr. Winter Garden," is a former art teacher recognized for his sketches of the community. His book, "Sundays in the South: Touring West Orange County," depicts a time when families piled into the car on Sunday afternoons in search of scenery and cool breezes. On a tour, he points out some of the historic homes in the Lakeview neighborhood illustrated in his book, along with the city park and boat ramp on the shore of Lake Apopka.

The next stop is the Winter Garden station of the West Orange Trail, a 19-mile rails-to-trail project that has been a boon for the city, according to Boll-



Residents head to the restored 1935 Garden Theatre to catch plays, concerts and movies.

CITY OF WINTER GARDEN



An open-air marketplace, Winter Garden Village at Fowler Groves adds an array of modern amenities, including a health club, department and electronic stores and a Barnes & Noble.

AMY MARTELL/CITY OF WINTER GARDEN

hoefer. Weaving through the community and nearby towns of Oakland and Apopka, the trail draws about 55,000 bicyclists, joggers, skateboarders and even horseback riders each month.

One of the shining stars on West Plant Street is the restored Garden Theatre, which reopened in 2008. Originally built as a single-screen movie house in 1935, the theater brings a cultural performing arts center to Winter Garden, hosting live plays, concerts and films. With its Mediterranean Revival style, it's now a major achievement in the revitalization of downtown, Rod says.

For history buffs, two museums are within walking distance of each other. The Heritage Museum, with its yellow caboose on display, was once the Atlantic Coast Line Depot, dating to 1918. The structure houses Native American artifacts, historical photographs and citrus labels from long-forgotten groves. The Central Florida Railroad Museum, in an old passenger station, contains an extensive collection of train memorabilia. Also in downtown, the 1927 Edgewater Hotel, which has been re-invented as a bed-and-breakfast inn, offers two popular restaurants, Thai Blossom and The Chef's Table.

With its charm and attractions, Winter Garden turned out to be "a nice place to retire" for newcomers Bob and Brenda Ploudre. Both were born and raised in Missouri and met in 1986

WINTER GARDEN, FLORIDA

Population: 30,050

Location: Winter Garden is in central Florida, situated in western Orange County, about 15 miles west of downtown Orlando. On the southeast shore of Lake Apopka, the city is convenient to Ocoee to the east, Windermere to the south and Oakland to the west.

Climate: High Low

January 71 48

July 92 71

Average relative humidity: 73%

Rain: 50 inches annually

Cost of living: Below average

Housing cost: The average sales price for single-family homes and condos in Winter Garden was \$181,135 in 2010, according to information from the Orlando Regional Realtor Association.

Sales tax: 6.5%

Sales tax exemptions: Groceries, prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines.

State income tax: None

Estate tax: None

Inheritance tax: None

Property tax: The rate is \$17.37 per \$1,000 of assessed value in the city of Winter Garden. Homes are assessed at 100% of market value. Yearly taxes on a \$181,135 home in the city would be about \$2,475, with the first two exemptions noted below. Minimal additional fees may apply for miscellaneous services, including streetlights, retention ponds and area maintenance.

Homestead exemptions: There is a homestead exemption of \$25,000 off assessed value for permanent residents residing on the property Jan. 1 of the tax year. There is an additional exemption of up to \$25,000 off assessed value for local and municipal taxes, but not school taxes, applying to homes assessed at \$50,000 and above. Homes assessed at \$75,000 and higher get the full extra exemption, and homes assessed between \$50,000 and \$75,000 get a partial exemption. A senior exemption is available for those 65 and older whose household income meets state restrictions, set at \$26,203 in 2011 and adjusted annually; it's \$25,000 off the assessed value for county taxes and \$25,000 for city taxes.

Religion: There are more than 40 churches representing various faiths in the Winter Garden area.

Education: The Winter Garden parks and recreation department offers programs for adults ages 50 and older at the

Jessie Brock Community Center. These include book clubs, knitting groups and lunch-and-learn seminars with various speakers. Day trips are available to destinations around central Florida, including theaters, festivals and even a chocolate factory where guests make their own treats. Additional adult programs cover such topics as horticulture, soap making and needlework. Some classes are free, while others require a small fee. The Learning Institute for Elders at the University of Central Florida in Orlando features courses in science, music and film, though classes have waiting lists currently. Check for availability.

Transportation: Orlando International Airport, about 30 minutes from Winter Garden, provides nonstop flights to numerous destinations worldwide. Lynx, the Central Florida Regional Transportation Authority, serves Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties and operates buses from Winter Garden to various spots in Greater Orlando. Amtrak offers train service from Orlando to Tampa and Miami as well as New York City.

Health care: Health Central, located on an 85-acre campus in neighboring Ocoee, is an acute-care hospital with 171 beds and a new 34-bed emergency department. Its facilities feature a cardiac-care unit, outpatient diagnostic area and orthopedic and spine center. The Orlando VA Medical Center, which serves veterans in central Florida, is constructing a new complex for completion in 2012. The \$665 million facility will include a 134-bed hospital, with larger private rooms, and a multispecialty outpatient clinic. There are additional medical centers in Greater Orlando.

Housing: Among new communities is **Covington Chase**, (877) 566-0565, about a mile east of downtown Winter Garden. It features three- and four-bedroom homes from \$159,990 to \$199,990 as well as a pool and recreation area. The neighborhood has roughly 90 homes built of more than 300 planned. **The Parks at Independence — Ashton Woods Homes**, (407) 614-5936, about eight miles south of downtown, offers new three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath townhomes from \$169,900. The community features a fitness center, pools and walking and biking trails, among other amenities. Winter Garden also has older homes in long-established neighborhoods, including those near the lakefront.

There are few for-sale signs, attesting to the popularity of these areas. Recent home sales in the city include: a two-bedroom condo, south of West Colonial Drive, for \$139,900; a three-bedroom home, built northeast of downtown in 1993, for \$209,900; and a three-bedroom home in the gated golf community of Stoneybrook West for \$197,000. Between Winter Garden and Oakland, a new traditional neighborhood development by Castle & Cooke called **Oakland Park**, (407) 905-5667, maintains an Old Florida feel, preserving the natural habitat. A certified green community that borders two lakes, it has homes from the mid-\$200,000s.



Visitor lodging: Built in 1927, the historic Edgewater Hotel in downtown Winter Garden is a bed-and-breakfast inn with two restaurants, a gift store, ice cream parlor and barbershop, \$76-\$130, (407) 654-6921. Other hotels in the city include the 46-room Orange County National Golf Center and Lodge, with 45 holes of golf, \$58-\$98, (888) 727-3672; and the 102-room America's Best Value Inn Orlando West, with an outdoor pool, \$59-\$89, (407) 654-1188. A number of accommodations are within a short distance of Winter Garden near Orlando's theme parks and attractions.

Information: West Orange Chamber of Commerce (Where to Retire magazine), 12184 W. Colonial Drive, Winter Garden, FL 34787, (407) 656-1304 or www.wochamber.com. City of Winter Garden (Where to Retire magazine), 300 W. Plant St., Winter Garden, FL 34787, (407) 656-4111 or www.cwgd.com. Visit Orlando (Where to Retire magazine), 6700 Forum Drive, Suite 100, Orlando, FL 32821, (800) 972-3304 or www.orlandoinfo.com.



CITY OF WINTER GARDEN

Scenic spots include the cyclist's favorite, 19-mile West Orange Trail, and Lake Brim and its surrounding preserved wetlands within the Oakland Park community.

Before reaching the seating area, guests pass by a tempting 20-foot-long case filled with baked goods and desserts of every kind. The lunch menu includes specialty soups and sandwiches with a French flair. Christine says that Winter Garden has now become a foodie destination, with several restaurants along Plant Street earning dining awards from Orlando reviewers.

at a Parents Without Partners campout. They were members of different chapters, but they attended the same event, Bob with his four children (three teens and a 10-year-old) and Brenda with her daughter, 10. Within 13 months, they were married.

In August 2009, the Ploudres settled into Winter Garden's Hyde Park, a neighborhood of manufactured homes and one of the few 55-plus communities in the area. When Bob says, "We are RV people," it's somewhat of an understatement. From 2000 to 2009, they lived full time in their motor home — although part of it may have been unintended.

In 2000, long after Bob had taken early retirement from aerospace manufacturer McDonnell Douglas and worked for several more years as a contract employee, the couple decided to hit the road and become "RV snowbirds." But a funny thing happened along the way. "My retirement got interrupted," says Bob, 69. His skills in engineering management were needed at the Lockheed Martin facility in Fort Worth, TX. "I thought I'd work one year and be out, but six years later, I was still there," he says.

During their time in Fort Worth, the couple's home was their class A recreational vehicle, with four expansion slideouts, situated in a local RV park. Brenda, 61, who had worked in office administration for a dentist in St. Charles, MO, for more than 20 years,

helped manage the mobile home park. Now, finally off the road, the Ploudres still enjoy traveling. But today their interests lean toward cruises, a time-share in Cancun and occasional trips to Las Vegas.

"We enjoy Hyde Park because it's like a small town within the small town of Winter Garden," says Bob. They discovered the city, he says, after researching Florida communities with available services and a friendly feel. As far as living in a spacious two-bedroom, two-bath home instead of the confines of a recreational vehicle, it has been an adjustment, Bob says. "I often catch myself calling out to Brenda, 'Where are you?'" he laughs.

To see the old and new at work in Winter Garden, visitors can stop at Sweet Traditions Bakery & Cafe. Located in the original 1920 Bray hardware store building, it's operated under the watchful eye of French chef Stephane Crocher, 42, a native Parisian, and his wife, Christine, 41, a fishmonger's daughter from Massachusetts.

"After meeting and working together, we decided we wanted to be entrepreneurs and run our own business," Christine says. With stops in Hanover, NH, then Paris to work with Stephane's family, they returned to the U.S. and opened the West Plant Street eatery in 2006.



AMY MARTELOCCIO OF WINTER GARDEN

The town's recognition is no surprise to City Manager Bollhoefer. He calls Winter Garden a "modern-day Mayberry USA," a community without pretense. "I hear it over and over again from residents. It reminds them of their hometown, of Andy Griffith's TV show," he adds.

As Griffith once described Mayberry: "A simpler time, a sweeter place." **WR**

Alan Macher is a writer in Ocala, FL, and a frequent contributor to Where to Retire.

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