

Why do we have Master Gardeners?

By: Sarah Adams

Member of the Big Country Master Gardeners

When the term “Master Gardener” was first coined in the early 1970s to describe a new Extension program in Washington State, no one predicted it would spread into Texas and become one of the most effective volunteer organizations in the State. In 1978, county agents in the Texas Cooperative Extension were experiencing overwhelming demands for horticulture information from the folks in their counties. Around this time, Dr. Sam Cotner, Extension vegetable specialist, described the success of the movement in Washington state and the program was started shortly thereafter in Texas.

The first Master Gardener class was held in 1979 in Montgomery County and drew about 25 people. The 50-hour course was held in the evenings and taught by Extension agents and specialists from Texas A&M using a manual compiled from Extension publications and news articles. Volunteer service was optional, but class members were encouraged to work on Extension projects through the year. By 1987, guidelines were developed for the program, including a minimum of 50 hours of formal training and 50 hours of volunteer service to become a certified Texas Master Gardener. The official 500-page training handbook was completed about that time and is updated every few years to keep up with proven best practices that are environmentally friendly and have good results in Texas.

In the 1990s, the Texas Master Gardener movement exploded, fueled by the program’s success and visibility. In 1991, a statewide, non-profit organization was formed and called the Texas Master Gardener Association. As of January 1998, there are 54 county Master Gardener programs with over 4,000 certified Master Gardeners statewide. In 1997, they contributed more than 182,000 hours of volunteer service. The Big Country Master Gardeners Association (BCMGA) was established in 1996 to serve not only Taylor County, but multiple counties in our area with similar challenges and goals.

The state-wide Master Gardener program is sponsored by the Texas A&M AgriLife extension service, and implements a broad range of projects to enhance the quality of life in local communities across the state. Currently, the objectives of all Texas Master Gardener programs

are to: (1) disseminate research-based horticultural information to individuals and groups in Texas, (2) develop and improve community projects related to horticulture, including demonstration gardens, and community gardens, (3) develop a network to help administer the local Master Gardener projects, (4) establish 4-H horticulture clubs and Junior Master Gardener groups.

Some projects are common to all Master Gardener programs like answering homeowner's questions and presenting relevant information. For example, Big Country Master Gardeners offer several free education programs in June. There will be a program on Gardening with Kids at 6:00pm on June 13th at the Abilene Public Library South Location. This program will be presented again at the Abilene Public Library Main Location on June 16th at 10:00am. We will also have the BCMGA Saturday Seminar from 9:00-12:00 on June 24 in the Taylor County Extension Office Conference Room. (If you are reading the online newspaper, click on [Big Country Gardeners](#) for a calendar of our upcoming events.)

Big Country Master Gardeners are also involved with projects that directly reflect our community. Some of our current projects include, maintaining a beautiful demonstration garden located on the grounds of the Taylor County Extension office. (link [Extension Office](#)) This garden features a wonderful variety of plants that work well with the challenges in our area. Further, all of the plants are identified in the garden so that anyone can come and see the beautiful plants that can grow in our area. We help maintain the grounds of the Swensen house; this Abilene icon dates back to 1910 and the grounds are stunning! ([Swenson House](#)) Other projects include helping to maintain some of the gardens located at the Abilene Zoo ([Abilene Zoo](#)) and the WASP museum in Sweetwater ([WASP](#)).

A love of gardening and search for knowledge is central to why Master Gardeners join the program. They remain Master Gardeners to enjoy the camaraderie and friendship of others who share their interests, to gain and share horticulture knowledge, and to give back to the community.

If you have any questions, call the Taylor County Extension Office at 325-672-6048 or email us at mgardeners@yahoo.com. We hope you will like us on Facebook and visit bcmgtx.org for all Big Country Master Gardener information and events. We are here to help you!