

## History of the Texas Master Gardener Program

When the term “Master Gardener” was first coined in the early 1970s to describe a new Extension program in Washington State, few could have predicted it would spread into Texas and blossom into one of the most effective volunteer organizations in the State.

The Texas Master Gardener program had its beginnings in 1978 in an Extension horticulture training at A&M University when Dr. Sam Cotner (Extension vegetable specialist) described the success of the movement in Washington state. At that time, county agents in the Texas Cooperative Extension were experiencing overwhelming demands for horticulture information, much like their colleagues in the Pacific Northwest.

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.

Two more counties, Galveston and El Paso, started programs in 1981. By the end of the decade, five more counties had Master Gardener programs: Harris ((1986), Dallas (1986), Tarrant (1987), Bexar (1989) and Denton (1989).

The Texas Agricultural Extension Service made an official commitment to a Texas Master Gardener program in 1987 with the hiring of a statewide coordinator. At that time, 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 500-page training handbook also was completed then.

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 100 county Master Gardener programs with 6,393 volunteers who contribute 520,144 hours of volunteer service statewide.

Some projects are common to all Master Gardener programs. Answering homeowner’s questions by phone is at the heart of most Texas programs. Classroom gardening is another popular project. Some programs add different twists such as cylinder gardening (Harris, El Paso, Galveston), vermicomposting (Smith) or butterfly gardens (Denton). Other common projects are speakers bureaus, community gardens and information booths at local events.

Many projects that Master Gardeners are involved in directly reflect their communities. Examples are the Big Tree Contest (Orange), Wetlands Reclamation (Galveston), state historical part landscaping (Paris, Grayson) and State Capitol landscaping (Travis).

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.

On the other hand, the 54 Master Gardener programs are as individual as the gardeners who inhabit them. Size of overall programs varies from 1 Master Gardener (Madison and Leon) to 8 Master Gardeners (Lamar) to 478 Master Gardeners (Bexar). Regardless of the size program, there is always a waiting list of individuals wanting to enter the Master Gardener program.

Though Texas Master Gardeners are united in name, the program’s strength lies in its ability to meet the diverse needs of the individual communities it serves. By combining statewide guidelines with local direction and administration, the program offers the flexibility necessary to keep it a vital and responsive organization that serves all of Texas.