

A Heavenly Farm Visit

This past week, I visited the farm of horticulturist, Amy Juan. Amy is a wealth of knowledge and a recently retired teacher who loves to share. She hosted a tour for members of one of my classes. Every plant in Amy's garden, which rambles around the farm buildings and home, has a purpose.

"This plant is rich in antioxidants and is so good as a tea, or steamed with a bit of flowering chives," she offers. Beautiful blue blossoms of chicory greet us as we approach a new space. Amy explains how the roots are deep and the roots are the part of the plant that was used in coffee. With deep roots the plant is able to pick up all kinds of micronutrients so the use of chicory to stretch the coffee actually added to the nutritional value of the coffee." Wow! I am thinking, I am from south Louisiana where chicory is used, but I did not know that. Miss Amy, I am impressed.

The broccoli heads are gone, but Amy is harvesting side shoots for stir fry and feeding the leaves, rich in antioxidants, to the chickens. She allowed the argula to flower and this plant is going to the girls, also.

Her sugar cane and bamboo are a fascination. She is experimenting with the sugar cane and has several varieties, including one that is black. I imagine stems of black sugar cane in a tall vase on the floor. So, beautiful, I am thinking and realize that she has provided more information that I've been too distracted to hear. She uses sugar cane as a wind break to keep the fruit from scarring or receiving chilling winds.

The mulberry trees are producing fruit in several areas. Under two trees she has tarps to catch falling berries. I am thinking ice cream topped with the beautiful sweet berries, but I hear her say they are for the egg producing ladies. Finally, she brings us to a tree where the fruit is sweeter than all of the others and declares, "this is the best one for ice cream!" Ah, at last.

An area that once served as water troughs for the animals is now a raised bed with vegetables and flowers surrounded by fences covered with passion vine and the Japanese flat bean. More vines await our inspection with birdhouse gourds hanging everywhere from bamboo supports.

Near the house the gardens feed butterflies. The flowering dill has a one-half inch long caterpillar. We all taste the leaves of Mexican marigold. Bee balm, porter weed, red-leaf hibiscus, and roses share this space. We leave inspired by this little bit of heaven, filled with ideas for our own spaces. Thank you, Amy.

If you would like to meet Amy, join us at the Grow'n Growers Farmers Market, 1st and Business 83 in McAllen from 8:30 a.m. until 11:30 a.m. today and every Saturday through June. Follow us on Facebook.

If you are a small producer or rancher and want to improve your opportunities to sell to restaurants or to food service buyers, join us Monday, April 8, for a Market Ready Workshop, Texas A & M AgriLife Extension and Research Center, 2401 E. Business 83 in Weslaco, 9:00 to 3:00. Cost is \$25.00, including lunch and materials.

And, on Friday April 12, if you want to learn about Urban Farming and selling at farmers markets, join me and Dr. Joe Masabni, Small Farm specialist, at our office in Edinburg, 9:00 to 11:30 a.m. Free, but space is limited. Call (956) 383-1026 to reserve a seat.

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