**Weekly Express-News Article**

**By Calvin R. Finch, PhD, SAWS Director, and Horticulturist**

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**“Master Gardeners and Gardening Volunteers of South Texas”**

Several counties in this region including Bexar, Comal, Gonzales and Guadalupe have Master Gardener chapters. Master Gardeners are trained volunteers organized and sponsored by the Texas Agrilife Extension Service. All Master Gardeners have attended formal training on horticultural topics such as basic botany, soils, flowers, vegetables, water conservation, composting, insects, plant diseases, and trees, usually over a 14 week curriculum presented for four hours, one day per week. The training is provided by A&M Professors and other experts.

The training is in high demand. One of the selection factors is volunteer service. All Master Gardeners must provide at least 50 hours of service every year to maintain their status. Candidates seeking the training must commit to the volunteer service.

There are many volunteer opportunities. In Bexar County, you can staff the homeowner hotline, make presentations through the speaker’s bureau, help at the Children’s Garden at the Botanical Gardens, teach water conservation, work on plant research projects, assist on planting and maintenance of landscape projects, and many more projects.

The projects include office, education, and “dig in the dirt” opportunities. The chapters in Comal Gonzales and Guadalupe counties offer similar opportunities. You do not necessarily need to live in the county where the chapter is housed.

In years past the Bexar County Master Gardener chapter has sponsored two International Master Gardener Conferences. From May 3 through May 6 this year 750 Statewide Master Gardeners will be in San Antonio to attend continuing education classes and tours as part of the 2012 Texas Master Gardener Conference. As part of that conference, Master Gardeners are sponsoring a plant sale that is open to the public. They will have past and present Texas Superstar plants and will introduce the new “Orange Frost” citrus plant, which is a cross between the Satsuma mandarin orange and the Changsha tangerine. Four wholesale nurseries are providing plants. It will be big!

Plan on being there between 10:00 AM and 6:00 PM on Thursday, May 3 or between 7:00 AM and 9:00 PM on Friday, May 4. The convention is outside the Norris Convention Center, 4522 Fredericksburg Road. The entrance is at the Wonderland of Americas (Crossroads Mall near Target.)

All four area Master Gardener chapters will be offering training in 2012. Bexar County has both spring and fall classes, the next class begins on August 29 running every Wednesday for 13 weeks, the time has not yet determined. Comal County’s class runs from January to May, registration begins in early fall. The next Gonzales County class begins on Tuesday, September 11 and runs through May, from 8:30 AM to 12:30 PM. The Guadalupe County opportunity is every Wednesday from 10:00 AM to 2:30 PM beginning on August 5, 2012. For more information on the classes and activities, visit the respective website or call 830-401-0800 in Guadalupe County, 830-620-3440 in Comal County, 830-672-8531 in Gonzales County, and 210-467-6575 in Bexar County.

The weekend of May 4 through May 6 is a busy time for area gardeners. In addition to the Texas Master Gardener State Conference, the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center is conducting its Birdathon. A birdathon is like a walkathon except that the pledges are made on the number of birds species identified instead of miles walked.

I lead the Gardening South Texas Birdathon Team that includes Jerry Parsons, Milton Glueck and Jean Peterson. We usually identify about 70 species of birds. Make a pledge of 25¢ per bird, and your donation would be $17.50 for 70 species. To make a pledge email me at “cfinch@saws.org” or call 210-382-4455. Milberger’s Nursery will match each donation made by the public.

To learn more about the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center or Birdathon visit their website at “[www.tx.audubon.org/mitchell-lake-audubon-center](http://www.tx.audubon.org/mitchell-lake-audubon-center)” or call me at the Gardening South Texas Radio Show at 210-308-8867 or toll-free 866-308-8867 from noon to 2:00 PM Saturday or Sunday.

There is another gardening volunteer organization in the San Antonio area. For gardeners interested in learning more horticulture, performing meaningful volunteer service, and having fun with other gardeners, the Gardening Volunteers of South Texas may be your cup of tea.

The GVST is less stringent on its training and volunteer service requirements. They do sponsor a training class the third Monday of the month from noon until 3:00 PM at the San Antonio Garden Center and offer many interesting volunteer service opportunities across the same spectrum of projects as the Master Gardeners. In fact, many gardeners belong to both groups and many projects have representatives of both groups participating.

GVST is very much involved in SAWS Water Conservation outreach, Jerry Parson’s plant research and the Festival of Flowers. For more information on Gardening Volunteers of South Texas membership and activities visit their website at “[www.gardeningvolunteers.org](http://www.gardeningvolunteers.org)”