



Master Gardener Robyn Stack helps children plant potatoes as part of a vegetable garden project at South Athens Elementary.

DIRTY HANDS, GOOD WORKS

MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM PLANTS GOOD DEEDS

By Toni Garrard Clay

Photo above by Toni Garrard Clay.
All others by Wayne Stafford

“MY FAVORITE THING is the broccoli,” said an utterly adorable, blond-haired girl who looked to be about six years old. She stood among ten of her classmates, all of whom were anxious to share their favorite item in the school vegetable garden. This writer announced she likes kale and was promptly offered shreds of kale leaves from four children. These were kindergartners carrying vegetables in their pockets to snack on. Prepare yourselves for the apocalypse.

As unlikely as such a scenario seems, it’s happening in no small part as a result of the efforts of the Henderson County Master Gardener program. The vegetable garden at South Athens Elementary School was initially started as the brainchild of teacher Sunni Starkes.

“The first year it was just me and some other teachers,” said Mrs. Starkes. “The master gardeners got involved the second year, and that’s when the program really took off. ... They have the expertise, patience and manpower hours to put into it. They’re here every Thursday to work in the garden. They always have something interesting to do with the kids.”

The Master Gardener program is an educational and volunteer program offered by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Master gardeners in Henderson County include a daylily farmer who offers presenta-



tions throughout the area, several organic gardeners who sell produce at the Athens Farmers Market and to local restaurants, orchid growers, a worm composter and a native plants specialist, to name just a few of the group’s represented interests.

“Being a master gardener is about educating others and sharing our love for gardening,” said program intern Bob Erickson. “Everyone of us have a different passion. I’m into composting; another person is into native plants; others are about ornamental gardens or butterfly gardens. We help to educate the community.”

“Not only that,” added Master Gardener Lyn Stroud. “We learn from each other all the time.”



The most highly visible community project undertaken by the HC Master Gardener program is the beautiful Dream Garden at the East Texas Arboretum & Botanical Society in

Athens. It began many years ago as a trial garden for “Earth-kind” roses and was later converted into a Texas cottage garden featuring a variety of beauties such as the Peggy Martin Rose (the Hurricane Katrina survivor rose), irises, daylilies, salvias, red buds, poppies, lantanas and more.

“We’re out there working in the Dream Garden every Monday,” said Master Gardener Intern LaTrecia Jeffcott. “We want people to come see it and to attend our free workshops and sign up for our newsletter (‘The Inside Dirt’). Our meetings are open to the public.”

“At its core, the Master Gardener program is a volunteer service organization,” said Agriculture Extension Agent Rick Hirsch. “They’ve given thousands of hours of volunteer time and been a huge asset to the community.”

To raise money to be able to offer free workshops and continue projects such as the children’s vegetable garden and the Arboretum Dream Garden, the Henderson County Master Gardener program holds one fundraiser a year. This year’s annual Spring Conference/Plant Sale will be held on Thursday, April 11 at the Cain Center. Noted horticulturist and author Dr.

Bill Welch will speak on sustainable alternatives for Texas gardens. Dr. Welch is the author of “Perennial Garden Color” and “Antique Roses for the South” as well as a contributor to Southern Living Magazine, Neil Sperry’s Gardens and other publications.

“I can’t believe how fortunate we are to have Bill Welch as our speaker,” said Stroud. “He’s just phenomenal. No one should miss what he has to say.”

The plant sale and silent auction will begin at 5 p.m., dinner will be served at 5:45, and Dr. Welch will begin speaking at 6:30. Tickets are \$20 and may be purchased from any master gardener, Athens Bank or the AgriLife Extension Office in Athens or visit henderson-co-tx-mg.org

The very next month, the first free workshop of the Summer Series will be held. On May 16 at 6:30 p.m. at the East Texas Arboretum, Master Gardener Dawnvolynn Callahan, owner of Big Chicken Daylily Farm, will be speaking on the topic of daylilies. 🇺🇸

Anyone interested in becoming a master gardener should contact the Henderson County AgriLife Extension office at 903-675-6130. The program requires a minimum of 50 hours of instruction covering a wide variety of horticultural topics. Participants are also asked to volunteer at least 50 hours of service within one year following their training to earn the title of Texas Master Gardener.

