

A new partnership is realized! Thirty-five Bexar County Master Gardeners (BCMG) attended the initial 6-hour Culinary Docent training at San Antonio Botanical Garden's (SABOT) year-old Culinary Garden August 21st and 23rd. The trained docents will eventually staff shifts any day of the week from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m., providing information, answering questions, and informally teaching visitors about the garden's edible plants and their use, gardening and conservation practices employed, and about SABOT.

Docents were welcomed by SABOT staff including Volunteer Coordinator - Nadezhda Garza, Executive Director - Bob Brackman, and Director of Programs – Katie Erickson, all of whom shared excitement about the partnership of SABOT and Texas A&M AgriLife and the BCMG in furthering the Culinary Garden's concept, "Good Food Grows." The concept has evolved over ten years as local benefactors pledged their support based on the building of a culinary garden program to help combat San Antonio's high levels of diabetes and obesity.

SABOT Board Member, Karen Greenwood spoke passionately about the history of the gardens (opened in 1980), and the work on and evolution of the 2010 expansion plan. The new ideas included a children's garden (now, a family adventure garden), the culinary garden, and even a parking garden (which later fell victim to budgetary and space constraints). Landscape architect, Christy Teneyck, and architect, Phil Wetel worked together to develop a new entry with the feel of entering through "canyon walls", the culinary garden design, and a WOW garden which sweeps around the Japanese Garden. A guiding concept for SABOT's goals has become: "Grow. Plants, People, Possibilities." Current visitors will notice there is still work underway. Still to come are an Event Center, Event Lawn, Administration Building, and completion of renovations to the Sullivan Carriage House.

Andrew Labay and Amanda Wiedgash, SABOT horticulturists, spoke to the group about the challenges of planting and maintaining a year-round, culinary demonstration garden, which is expected to be a showcase 12 months of the year. Emphasis is placed on sustainability and on ornamental value. Plants that don't thrive must be removed and replaced with more suitable varieties that will survive current conditions. Seasonal plantings are mapped out with the assistance of Tres Fromme, a nationally known consultant for display gardens. Every square inch of planted space is included in the mapping, which includes "color board" planning. Selections are impacted by the availability of seeds, necessitating searches for other available varieties of the desired vegetable, herb, or flower. (Seeds are started in the SABOT greenhouse, then transplanted to the garden at the appropriate time.) The culinary garden is organic and edible. They also say, wistfully, the Culinary Garden is "ephemeral" (lasting for a very short time).

Texas A&M AgriLife's Bexar County Extension Agent - Horticulture, David Rodriguez, has worked closely with the SABOT team in planning for the garden. He provides knowledge, guidance, and practical experience in plant selection and timing, soil choice and care, and fertilization practices. Current plantings have been done with New Earth Vegetable Mix mixed with New Earth base compost. A 19:5:9 (slow release) fertilizer is used. The seasonal design changes facilitate crop rotation.

Among the cool season varieties to be planted this fall are leeks, Brussel sprouts, several cabbages, collard greens, zucchini, butternut squash, buckwheat, winter wheat, artichoke, fennel, mustard, spinach, several lettuces, lima beans, quinoa, strawberries, beets, "Kaleidascope Mix" carrots, two daisies, calendula, two nasturtiums, and three violas.

Amanda Wiedgash took trainees on a brief tour of the garden to learn the basic layout of the beds and to point out some current highlight plants – including tapioca that surpassed all expectations with its size and beauty. She also pointed out showy amaranthus plants with dark red flowers on dark red upright foliage which produce grain (and edible leaves for salad) used in Central & Latin America and in the Himalayas.

SABOT's Chef Dave Terrazas greeted trainees in the cool, modern outdoor teaching kitchen which includes a double-decker convection oven and an induction cooktop. The message to visitors, he shared, is "Good Food Grows"--that plants are a source of food and the basis for a healthy diet. The long term plan is that visitors be invited to participate in the planting, harvesting, and preparation of plants for a healthy diet. He explained that the major benefactor of the kitchen's pavilion, Goldsbury Foundation, has partnered with SABOT to combine efforts in a program called "CHEF", Children's Health Education for Families. Programs offered include lunch and learn sessions, evening programs featuring local flavors, chefs, horticulturists and other food specialists. Whenever possible, they'll practice "hyper-localism", that is, the use of foods harvested on site.

The SABOT Conservation Director shared features of the garden and outdoor kitchen pavilion's low impact development. Water for the garden is harvested from the roofs, which provide a clean base, with rain chains into catchment basins. A bioswale slows down water movement with plants and rocks, and final runoff is accumulated in an underground cistern to control runoff and pollution. Crushed rock surfaces are permeable to recapture rainwater in the cistern. Air-conditioning condensate is collected. The roofs of the new buildings support 99 solar panels. The buildings are sided in "sinker cypress" (and sinker pine) from East Texas—reclaimed logs submerged for 100 years which are rot and bug-resistant; no trees were cut. Rock and gravel is locally quarried.

BCMG and SABOT volunteer, Stephanie Jones, briefed the trainees on docent etiquette tips and techniques. She suggested docents introduce themselves, greet guests, and invite guests to share their interests and opinions, too, as part of the conversation. Docents are ambassadors of SABOT and BCMG. She suggested personal notecards as an aid to docents, both for information and to record visitors' questions for referral. Personal stories and experiences can further engage guests as docents share knowledge, and practical examples for the use of the edible plants help engage guests' ability to take knowledge home with them. She shared suggestions for tactile experience--sharing plant scents, touch, and taste with visitors, with care not to damage plants. Docents will wear a SABOT apron on which the BCMG badge is worn.

Training closed with a session to generate and share garden learning activities for adults and children, to include plant identification, search and color games as well as knowledge of plant use in various dishes. Feedback on the training was requested and the trainees asked about information resources available to help docents be knowledgeable more quickly about the garden plantings and layout. Also requested were regular communication from SABOT to the docents regarding garden development and issues, as well as seasonal planting information and layouts, notes of special events and plantings.

The first volunteer opportunities for the trained Culinary Docents are now on the VMS calendar, September 15, 22, and 29, from 9 a.m. – Noon. We understand that additional docent training sessions for additional BCMG volunteers are possible, once future resource needs are determined.