



Master Gardener of the Season

By Ann Marie Caldwell

John Vann, our Master Gardener for the Spring Season, could not believe that he had been chosen for this honor because, as he put it, he is just a regular guy. For John, there are two groups of people, those who are “in-front” or team leaders and those who are “back-front” or background members of the team. John just could not believe that the Board of Directors had chosen a back-front type of guy like himself as Master Gardener for the Spring Season.

John is very much aware of what it means to be in the spotlight, to be an “in-front” person. He spent most of his 39 years in the petroleum business in that position, retiring from Valero as Vice President of IT Infrastructure in 2013. John’s numbers were behind his retirement, and they were all up: his weight, his blood sugar, and his blood pressure. John needed to switch from being “in-front” to being “back-front.” With this fact in mind, John made three conditions for his retirement: no public speaking, no IT work, and no leading teams! Has he managed to keep these promises to himself? Well, sort of!

John did not retire with any raging desire to be a gardener nor did he come from a gardening background. He was lured into becoming part of the Master Gardener Class 58 by his neighbor Holly Hodgins, who had served as President of the Rose Society and a friend of John’s wife. Whenever John and his wife would walk past her yard, he was dazzled by its beauty while his own yard was what he termed a disaster. In chatting with Holly about the differences between his front yard and Holly’s, she suggested he look into becoming a Master Gardener so that he could learn how to transform his own yard. This advice came at an opportune time when John was involved with a community garden project aimed at providing food for senior citizens. He had three raised beds built by some boy scouts on a plot of land, donated soil, compost and mulch but no expertise about what to do with these beds. So, John applied, was accepted, and became a Master Gardener in the Spring of 2014.

When John vowed that he would not make any presentations during his retirement years, he did not count on what passion would push him to do. What is John passionate about? It’s drip irrigation. Inspired by presentations given by Dr. Dotty Woodson, and by his association with Lou Kellogg, Vince Vita and Anna Vogler, John got his Specialist Certificate in Irrigation and was off and running, giving presentations on that topic at Cultivate!, the San Antonio Home and Garden Shows, at Garden Clubs, anywhere someone wanted a speaker on drip irrigation. Since his initial entrance into the speaker circuit, John has branched out into giving presentations on basic landscape principles for Habitat for Humanity, whose recipients are required to have this knowledge.

While not a leader, John has been a tireless team player. He sets up for events such as the Home and Garden Shows. He assisted Vince Vita in installing drip irrigation in the Children’s Gardens at SABOT. He has driven the van for rodeo volunteers. He has helped out with community gardens and anywhere else that a good team player is needed.

True to his vows, John has resisted becoming part of the Master Gardener Board of Directors, although he has been asked to do so on several occasions. However, he has used his expertise in IT and finance to help the Board members when asked to do so. He has recently helped them with a required audit and with developing a budget, and he serves as Parliamentarian, when the permanent one cannot attend Board meetings.

John’s life is full, and he is again healthy. Because drip irrigation and rainwater harvesting, a recent addition, are his passions, his presentations are fun rather than stressful. His numbers are down: weight, blood sugar and blood pressure. He sees himself as a useful team player and does not miss the stress of being an in-front person.

John has also learned a lot, and not just about gardening. His advice for Master Gardeners is the following: First, use drip irrigation where it makes sense. Every drop of water counts! It will save you a lot of time and work. Second, experiment with plants. John has his own experimental garden where he tries out new specimens. Third, be kind to other Master Gardeners, especially to those who drive the van during rodeo. Fourth, be flexible and dare to experiment. Lastly, but most importantly, go to the Agri-Life website and pick a topic you know nothing about and learn something new. Knowledge, like water, expands one drop at a time. The best advice, however, is one given by John’s life: be the best possible “back-front” person that you can be. An “in-front” team leader, while valuable, is only as good as the “back-front” people on his or her team. The fact that he has been a good “back-front” person in many different situations is the reason that John Vann was chosen as our Master Gardener for the Spring Season.