

Master Gardener of the Summer

Jim Strong

By Ann Marie Caldwell



In this strange summer of 2020, when most volunteer events have been cancelled, Jim Strong, our Master Gardener for the Summer Season, provides an excellent example of what can still be done to acquire those much-needed volunteer hours. Jim answers the Master Gardener Hotline on Tuesday afternoons and spends the rest of his time answering emails that come to him through info@bexar.org. Jim is officially the Coordinator of the Hotline, which means that he is the focal point for any administrative work that needs to be done concerning the Hotline. At a time when many novice gardeners are spending part of their forced seclusion outside in their yards, this is a valuable service that the Bexar County Master Gardeners provide for the community.

Jim chose this manner of service because he loves to share information about gardening with fellow gardeners. Before events were cancelled, he did not miss an opportunity to man the Master Gardener booth at events such as the Home and Garden shows. While he is not big on selling plants (He does the shuttle service instead of plant sales during rodeo), Jim loves to engage all who stop by a Master Gardener booth in conversations about gardening. The Hotline provides Jim with an opportunity to continue with these conversations.

Jim's love of dispersing information is a natural outgrowth of his professional years in the Petrochemical Industry. After graduating from high school in Amarillo, Texas, Jim moved to Austin, where he studied chemistry at the U. of Texas. After three years with books, labs and lectures, Jim was ready for some hands-on experience. He abandoned his degree work and took a job in Corpus Christi working for Celanese Chemical Company. This proved to be a good decision. Jim not only got hands-on experience and a paycheck, but the company also paid for him to complete his degree. He was to get even more hands-on experience when he transferred from doing research to a production unit in Bay City. There he provided chemistry-based knowledge to support the production units. After six years, Jim went back to Corpus, this time in a technical research capacity to work with companies that make petroleum-based products. This is when the fun really began. Jim traveled all over the world to support customers that needed his knowledge and experience. As part of his job, he also trained salesmen and marketing personnel.

Jim reluctantly retired in July of 2003 and immediately enrolled in the Nueces County Master Gardener Program the following September. Upon graduation, he began working with the Hotline there. Jim might still be working the Hotline in Corpus, except for a very important event: his daughter, who lives in San Antonio, began having the first of her three children. Jim's wife announced that she was moving to San Antonio and Jim could come with her if he so chose. Jim then made another good decision: he left Corpus Christi in 2005 and accompanied his wife to San Antonio.

While he misses the coast, with its warm climate that allowed him to grow semi-tropical plants all year long, Jim has adapted to his new habitat and has acquired the new techniques that gardening in San Antonio requires. As he has done most of his life, he has eagerly shared his newly acquired gardening knowledge with the community.

Manning the Hotline is both rewarding and challenging. When presented with a question for which Jim has no answer, he expands his own body of knowledge as he researches answers. He has also learned over the years that not all questions have an answer. As part of a natural cycle, plants, like people, get sick and some of them die for no good reason. Jim's upbeat response to a plant death: another good reason to visit the local nursery. As it is for all people who love plants, this is indeed a delight!

Jim's advice to other gardeners is a simple one: "Have fun!" Jim certainly does and, while he is having fun, he is also helping other gardeners to solve their gardening problems. Jim can also give us advice by his own example: if you are at a loss as to ways to accumulate volunteer hours while sheltering-in-place, a term used in some parts of the country for our forced hibernation, consider working the Hotline. This fun and challenging work can be done remotely from the comfort of your homes and requires only a willingness to be of service and to do a little research on topics that are sure to be of interest to all garden enthusiasts. Thank you, Jim, for your service in this valuable area of community outreach!