

Master Gardener of Spring 2021

Kathy Breniman

By Ann Marie Caldwell



After a dark winter, especially with its week of freezing temperatures amid roaming power and water outages, everyone is ready for Spring with its rebirth of warmer weather and the sprouting of leaves, flowers, and green grasses. The Master Gardeners celebrate this new season by highlighting one of its own members. Our Master Gardener for the Spring Season is Kathy Breniman, who has been a Master Gardener since 2017.

Kathy is originally from Iowa, but, like so many of her generation, after graduating from college, she succumbed to the lure of California with its warm temperatures and exciting social life. There, Kathy met her husband and settled down in Martinez, California, located in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay area. There she raised her son and daughter. She enjoyed her vegetable garden and was prepared to stay with her comfortable routine until fate intervened, as it inevitably does.

Kathy's son, who now lived in San Antonio, had her first grandchild. After commuting back and forth to visit this newcomer to the family, Kathy, who was now retired from her job with Wells Fargo, along with her husband, who was also retired from his job as a computer software engineer, did what many of her generation were now doing. She left sunny California and headed back east, this time to Texas. They bought a home in San Antonio, settled in, and Kathy once again began to till the soil of her vegetable garden.

But, lo and behold, all the skills she had garnered through her years of gardening in California did not work in South Texas. It did not take Kathy long to recognize that she needed help. That was the point at which she decided to become a Master Gardener. Then, thanks to her newly acquired skills and to the SAWS Water Saver Program, Kathy was ready to branch out from her first love of vegetable gardening into a general beautification of her yard. Turf areas were turned into beds that feature native Texas plants. A hobby she has of working with mosaic tiles now was used to produce stepping stones for her gardens and containers for her plants. Kathy had found in San Antonio a niche where she could express her creativity and continue her first love of raising vegetables. Fate had brought her to the place where she was meant to be.

Fate continued to direct Kathy's life, this time in the area of service to others. After being certified, she volunteered to help out at the Children's Garden in Harberger Park. Although she had previously volunteered with the Children's Garden at SABOT, it was only when she answered the call to service at Harberger Park that she knew she was where she was meant to be. For her, it was a perfect fit from the first day she showed up to volunteer. At first, she was content to just help out, but when there was a vacancy in the leadership of the program

that no one seemed to want to fill, Kathy and Linda Cace jumped in to co-sponsor this valuable service to the community.

Kathy loved working with the home-schooled children and their parents, who came to the park every Tuesday morning to learn about good gardening practices and then to put their newly acquired knowledge to work on their own garden plots. Before the pandemic, some 40 children participated in this gardening initiative. Since the pandemic, participation has declined, but the program is ongoing, although with a different format. Now the children learn about gardening through online presentations via ZOOM, and they apply this instruction to their own home garden plots. Through the ZOOM classes, the children have the opportunity to ask questions and to report successes and failures they have experienced in their home gardening endeavors. Prior to each online class, each student is sent a topic agenda so that each one can be prepared in advance for the lesson that will be presented.

This new manner of conveying gardening information has challenged the volunteers to come up with new ways of capturing and holding the children's attention. The topics now range beyond the hands-on learning that predominated with in-person instruction. A new lesson might be one that encourages critical thinking and/or artistic expression in the children. For example, they might be asked to create a work of art, a poem, or a song that expands upon the topic of "The Garden as an Inspiration." Linda Cace, a retired teacher, has taught the children poetic forms such as the Haiku. She then asked them to write a poem using that form about their garden or gardening experience and to share their creation with the other members of the ZOOM class. Another volunteer, Carol White, taught the children about vegetables, such as beets, whose leaves and fruits can all be eaten. Under Kathy's and Linda's inspiring leadership, all presenters are challenged to create engaging slide presentations to convey facts about a particular gardening subject. These new COVID restrictions might be daunting to some, but not to Kathy, who remains as enthusiastic about her new online role as she was about in-person teaching.

Kathy encourages all of her fellow Master Gardeners to follow her example and to find their very own niche in the organization, a place where they fit. For some, it might be by hands-on digging in the soil to help David in actual cultivation projects. For others it might be answering questions and researching garden topics for the Hotline or Facebook page. For still others, it might be writing, committee work, or developing presentations for online or in-person instruction to the public. Whatever it is, Kathy advises Master Gardeners not to be stopped by failures or setbacks. Instead, once a niche is found, you should continue along that path with enthusiasm and tenacity because at the end of that path, you will find personal fulfillment and satisfaction in the knowledge that you have made a difference in the lives of other people. So, with the rebirth of nature, let us all look forward to a rebirth in our commitment to be the best Master Gardeners possible, even with the restrictions that this pandemic has imposed upon us.