

**2021 Award Year**  
**Texas Master Gardener Association, Inc.**  
**Texas Search for Excellence Award**

**Outstanding Individual Master Gardener**  
**Grace Emery**

Grace Emery has distinguished herself as a leader within Bexar County Master Gardeners (BCMG). She became a Master Gardener in 2016 following a career as an aeronautical certification specialist. She soon completed Advanced Training in Texas Superstars and Vegetables. She has served as BCMG's vice-president and president. Her motto: "You need to be present to be President," integrated her into volunteering. She has served as Rodeo Chair, Awards Committee Chair, Monarch Festival event chair, and helped develop and lead San Antonio Botanical Garden's (SABOT) Culinary Garden Docent Program. She volunteers for Speakers Bureau, and works on and trains others for BCMG's Plant Hotline. Her willingness to encourage volunteers with her hands-on approach has led to additional member involvement in many projects and events. Grace has made a large impact on our BCMG organization with her exemplary leadership, horticultural expertise and infectious enthusiasm. She is truly "Amazing Grace," with 377 volunteer hours.

Through Grace's leadership in 2021, the Culinary Garden Docent Program at SABOT achieved 28,204 engagements, 1,198 volunteer hours with 91 docents doing 329, 2-4-hour shifts during a year when COVID variants changed opportunities for indoor education. With the new Volunteer Management System in development, and with COVID restrictions in place at SABOT and AgriLife Extension and the BCMG, Grace was able to get volunteers signed up by phone or text to volunteer at the Culinary Garden. She recorded their hours from February to late May to document this public outreach. BCMG weekly newsletter for volunteers, the Leaflet, featured Grace's articles, posting dates for volunteering which helped organize uniform educational outreach by the BCMG Culinary Garden volunteers. Recruitment, training, and seasonal retraining continued in small groups with 91 docents and 27 CHEF (Culinary Health and Education for Families) volunteers trained during 2021. This new effort adds opportunities for programs highlighting good nutrition and healthy living, pollination, composting, and environmental stewardship through hands-on gardening, food demonstrations and cooking programs for all ages. At the time of this interview, Grace said, "I've been in the (Culinary Garden) for four days straight. We're doing the (newly approved) CHEF program!" Her enthusiasm for this project at (SABOT) is contagious and carries over into all other projects she touches. Grace had all Extension handouts and information with the BCMG "Hotline" number laminated for visitors to take pictures with their phones.

Grace has chaired the Monarch and Pollinator Festival for 3 years. In 2021 the event was held in Confluence Park, a new location with success in the overall outcome. With no Youth Gardens Coordinator hired, Grace created a visual and fun program over the 4-hour event. Sixteen BCMG's (8 per shift) wore wings and antennae to attract and greet 3000 visitors to the area. 350 children learned about the life stages of a Butterfly by making a beaded bracelet with laminated pictures showing these stages. Adults were able to learn about pollinator plants that are successful in our area, with science-based information from the volunteer master gardeners. Butterfly attracting plants sold out.

The Master Gardener Homeowner's Hotline call center moved to volunteer homes in 2020-2021. This approach during COVID had 1,205 contacts, 997 by telephone and 208 by email. Grace continued working her 3-hour shifts as she mentored and assisted new hotline team members. She filled in missing

shifts and supplied needed additional information to new members so they could respond to their caller. The calls increased during COVID and many new to gardening called in to a trusted, locally relevant, research-based source for advice. An unprecedented 156-hour freeze added to the increase in callers seeking advice for plant loss. "The Hotline is the most phenomenal thing we have. People call in and they want to know what to do. We give them the information they need, and they hang up happy. Hotline callers have said, "I can always depend on Master Gardeners to give me the correct information." Grace says, "I'm still learning, and I can keep people up to date with the scientific, locally-based information that actually works in San Antonio." Grace promotes Master Gardeners and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension's exceptional educational programs, blogs, websites and events to Hotline callers. "Grace is a solid, all-around volunteer. She is ready to include you in any activity and always makes you feel welcome. BCMG benefits greatly from her many contributions." Liana Benavides, BCMG President.

Grace guides and mentors' volunteers while recognizing and leveraging each member's strength. Grace excels both at working alone and with a group. Whenever she chairs an event, she provides volunteers with pertinent AgriLife information. Being inspiring and honestly friendly is evident with her contacts with Master Gardeners and AgriLife Staff. One example is the Master Gardener growth in the Culinary Docent Project this year from 46 to 91 docents and 11 to 27 CHEF trained docents as well. An effective and engaging presenter, the BCMG Speakers Bureau seeks her expertise with presentations on Herbs, Vegetable Gardening, Texas Superstars, Butterflies/Pollinator Gardens and Citrus, reaching over 100 clientele during COVID restrictions in 2021. David Rodriguez, Bexar County Extension Agent - Horticulture coordinated with Grace on Earth Kind Series participation, Intern class sessions on herbs and companion gardening and the semi-annual School Educators training which AgriLife sponsors for teachers and education professionals. Monthly, Grace sends timely reports to AgriLife and the BCMG board on projects, events and training. Master Gardeners who work with Grace find she is an effective communicator who allows them to take on responsibilities and encourages future leadership within BCMG events, committees, and the BCMG Board. Culinary Garden docent and BCMG intern K.C. Hernandez stated, "The Culinary Docent Lead had the ability to guide and mentor a number of docents in the culinary garden, at the SABOT, while leveraging each person's strength. Grace takes pride in assisting and developing each individual. Additionally, by championing the docent program, she has skillfully navigated the uncertainty of these unprecedented times with COVID variants by increasing participation of Master Gardeners."

Under Grace's leadership with BCMG volunteers and interns in 2021, more than 30,000 people gained practical and accurate information from Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. As a SABOT/BCMG Docent, Grace spent weekdays and weekends on community education, covering all facets of gardening, Earth Kind techniques and companion gardening. Most inquiries were plant related but the questions about the rain chain reclamation system and the 29,000-gallon cistern used for drip irrigation gave Grace an opportunity to promote water conservation in San Antonio, one of her passions. The 156-hour freeze brought Grace many questions about citrus trees and other plants: how and why some survived and others did not. She presented at the School Garden Educator Training this year in the absence of the Bexar County Youth Gardens Coordinator, supporting AgriLife Extension Agent, David Rodriguez with other 6 BCMG Instructors and 28 volunteers during presentations for the 125 teachers and staff registered in the school gardens program. Grace taught teachers about plant selection and using companion plants in their school gardens. These group and one-on-one learning engagements are essential to the BCMG success. Grace participated in additional Bexar County education activities, including the monthly Brown Bag series. Grace engaged participants, actively seeking their questions on growing herbs to help those attending to get the help they need to succeed in their home gardening endeavors. This year with COVID and the help of BCMG, many Bexar County residents started gardening to access fresh herbs and vegetables for 'garden to table' living. The increase of Hotline calls and

attendance in educational programs by ZOOM enabled residents to receive locally relative, science-based information. The City of San Antonio is in the direct route or migratory path of the Monarch Butterflies, so, BCMG volunteers led by Grace, brought a team of volunteers to Confluence park for pollinator education, described above. Using her advanced training in vegetables, Grace presented to 35 members of a garden club at a local engineering company. They wanted to revive the raised beds on site to grow vegetables and herbs. After the presentation and multiple questions, they realized the main reason for lack of production were two-fold: lack of 8 hours of sunlight and proper watering techniques. Additional AgriLife information on vegetables and herbs was sent to the group. It is important for Master Gardeners to teach and encourage participants. Increased community accessibility to BCMG and Texas AgriLife events and classes and being able to find horticultural information on the websites give immediate access for horticultural concerns. "Amazing Grace" has been a proponent of all facets of Master Gardeners as an educator, volunteer, and advocate for AgriLife Extension's mission of educating Bexar County residents. KC Hernandez, a 2021 intern stated, "Whether you know Grace as "saving Grace,"(providing volunteer opportunities during COVID) "amazing Grace,"(leadership and knowledge) and/or "Grace under fire"(getting things done on time) you would just scratch the surface of this exceptional individual and understand the true meaning of Grace!"