

THE WCMGA – LEAF-PRO CONNECTION

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My name is Jean McLaren. I'm a Walker County Master Gardener, and I'd like to extend my thanks to the R.A.T. for inviting me here today to give you a presentation about our award winning LEAF-PRO program. (2) This presentation explains how Walker County Master Gardeners educate and encourage our county residents concerning ways in which they can help reduce solid waste.

Let me begin by explaining what a Master Gardener is exactly. (3)

Master Gardeners are unpaid volunteers from all walks of life, many of who are still working at full time jobs, together with those of us who are now retired, and who want to make a contribution or difference in their communities. (4) The State of Texas has approximately 5,300 Master Gardeners in 73 Counties, and many other States throughout the United States also offer this program. I understand the Master Gardener program is also becoming International in scope.

(5) We all receive horticultural training through an extension program developed by Texas A & M, a Land Grant University whose mission is to reach out and educate the residents of our communities. The volunteer aspect of the Master Gardener program allows individuals to dedicate their time and talents to enhancing, and improving their local communities utilizing the science and art of horticulture. Each of our Texas counties has a County Extension Agent whose specialization is in Agriculture or Horticulture, and Master Gardeners are considered to be an extension of his or her services to our communities. He or she also serves as an advisor to their county's Master Gardener group. It's difficult for our County Agents to consistently reach large numbers of people and provide education single handedly, so we fill a truly unique role.

As Master Gardener Interns, we receive a minimum of 50 hours of classroom instruction, (6) together with field trips and hands on workshops, all of which feature information that is scientifically proven and research based. (7) We're provided classes over a fourteen or fifteen week period taught by specialists or lecturers from local Universities in subjects such as botany, plant pathology, plant propagation, basic

entomology, the principals of landscape design, and so on, none of which are designed to enable us to become professionals in those fields. But they are designed to give us invaluable education and meaningful experiences to advance our gardening expertise.

Each participant is required to pass a comprehensive test over the material covered during the training sessions. (8) In return for this instruction, we are asked to give back a minimum of 50 hours of volunteer time, which might consist of (9) developing educational programs and displays, researching and providing answers to questions posed by county residents, (10) becoming involved in elementary school curriculum projects with school science teachers, (11) or maintaining and propagating plants for demonstration garden purposes.

When we've met this requirement, (12) we become a Certified Master Gardener. We're provided with a reference manual used during our classroom instruction, which we continue to use to teach county residents about environmentally sound landscape practices. Once certified, our Walker County program requires us to receive six hours of additional training each year for re-certification purposes, and to continue to contribute volunteer hours. Many of our members have received even more in depth training and have gone on to become Certified Specialists in subjects such as Water Harvesting, Propagation, Composting, and Landscape Principles and Design. (13)

So, how are the Walker County Master Gardeners and the LEAF-PRO program connected?

LEAF-PRO is an acronym for Landscape Environmental Awareness Facility – Protection of our environment, Reduction of solid waste, Outreach education. Simply put, LEAF describes our environmental education facility, and PRO describes our program goals.

The LEAF-PRO educational outreach program supports the Texas A & M University's AgriLife Extension Earth Kind Environmental Stewardship program, and is designed to demonstrate and promote educated, ecologically responsible decision-making state wide, through home landscape practices. The guiding principles of Earth Kind are a deep and abiding respect for the environment utilizing the latest scientifically sound research-based information.

The LEAF-PRO program was developed in response to a community need. (14) In 1999, Reggie Lepley, our Walker County Extension Agent, began thinking about how to increase his outreach to the community relative to environmentally related horticultural issues such as water conservation, safe fertilizer and pesticide use, and suitable plant selections for our area. There had always been a need by the ranchers and farmers in Walker County for agricultural information, but the City of Huntsville and other communities were growing, and residents were beginning to look to their County Agent for increasingly more horticultural information.

Reggie held a Texas Community Futures Forum during which Walker County residents were asked what was important to the future of their county. The residents replied they were concerned about environmental issues such as water and air quality. Armed with this information, Reggie knew he had to come up with a program that would provide county residents with information and education about a variety of environmental and horticultural issues. That program ultimately became known as LEAF-PRO.

Now the question became how to get this environmental education program into the hands of county residents. Reggie already had a full time job as County Agent and didn't have a budget that would allow hiring other individuals to run such a program. But the county had indicated a need, so he decided that perhaps it was time to start a Master Gardener program. (15) That led to the beginning of the Walker County Master Gardener training program, which began with a training class of fourteen volunteers in the spring of 2001. To date we have trained over 150 individuals and have well over 100 active volunteer members in our Walker County Master Gardener Association.

The 2001 class set to work to provide a demonstration garden that the residents of Walker County could observe and see for themselves exactly which plants would grow successfully in our area. (16) They also constructed a raised enabling garden suitable for those individuals with disabilities or physical restrictions. (17) These early gardens were carved out of a black-land pasture adjacent to the Walker County Extension Office. The Master Gardeners began researching horticultural topics they felt would be of interest to the public and developed programs accordingly. (18) But they also added another environmental recycling "layer" to the typical horticultural topics.

They erected a Rain Water Harvesting tank and used rainfall collected from the Extension Office roof for demonstrating water conservation, and they started a garden waste compost pile also for demonstration purposes. (19) They set up booths at community events and organized seminars designed to pass along our solid waste reduction message, and demonstrated practical household composting techniques using shredded paper, grass clippings, leaves and other garden debris that would otherwise be bagged and deposited in a landfill. (20) They partnered with Walker County and the City of Huntsville in providing assistance with their programs such as Trash Bash, Keep Huntsville Beautiful, (21) and the annual Walker County Proud Communities Tree Sale, and used these opportunities to pass along educational LEAF-PRO literature.

They soon realized that in order to educate the public more efficiently and effectively, and to propagate and raise plants and shrubs for the expansion of the demonstration gardens, a greenhouse was necessary. But as a low budget, non-profit organization, where in the world were they going to come up with the money for the construction of a big-ticket item such as a greenhouse? (22) So they looked at the LEAF-PRO program and realized it held great potential for grant opportunities. Because LEAF-PRO's objectives are ^ ^ ^ protection of our environment through responsible pesticide and fertilizer use, and water conservation, (23) reduction of solid waste ^ ^ by composting landscape waste and recycling plastic containers and other plastic household items, (24) and outreach education ^^ which provides environmental awareness through community programs and practical demonstrations, surely, someone out there in grant land would recognize the potential for providing the means for furthering and enhancing that educational outreach.

(25) Fortunately, we had a Master Gardener volunteer that directed the Solid Waste division for the City of Huntsville, and because of her employment, had an association and involvement with the Houston-Galveston Area Council. In 2004, she and Reggie put their heads together and decided that H-GAC might have grant funds available for the construction of that very important greenhouse based on our LEAF-PRO program. And so in 2004, Walker County Master Gardeners applied for (26) and received grant funding from the Texas Commission for Environmental Quality and the Houston-Galveston Area Council. (27) The foundation for the greenhouse was constructed adjacent to the demonstration garden by Master Gardener volunteers, (28) as was the installation of all the plumbing and electrical components,

(29) and construction of a dozen greenhouse tables. A crew from the greenhouse company erected the greenhouse itself. (30) Upon its completion, the greenhouse began to attract even more volunteers to the program and our membership and our demonstration gardens really began to grow. (31)

We very quickly began to realize the potential we had unleashed and discovered, much to our dismay our gardens were very much in need of help. (32) During our famous Texas downpours, the black-land clay gardens would become swamped because of poor drainage, and we were unable to provide the public with a safe footing throughout our facility.

(33) This led us to consider applying for another grant in 2006 for the construction of ADA-compliant pathways to accommodate wheelchairs, walkers, and strollers; a storage building for our ever-growing equipment needs; garden benches; a recycling super sorter for demonstration purposes; interpretive garden signs; and educational brochures. (34) The pathways would be constructed from TREX boards, a material manufactured from recycled plastic shopping bags and reclaimed wood scraps, which tied in beautifully with our solid waste reduction LEAF-PRO message. (35) All the labor for installation of the pathways (well over 1,000 linear feet and still counting) was to be provided by Master Gardeners. (36) Fortunately, our group was multi-faceted and talented, so there was no shortage of construction expertise. (37) The benches were manufactured from recycled plastic milk and water jug materials, and (38) the storage building was constructed from window cutouts normally discarded during the manufacture of foam core insulated steel doors. (39) All the materials used in these products would have been relegated to landfill! Once again, (40) TCEQ and H-GAC recognized the solid waste reduction educational potential of providing us with grant funding.

We are obviously a "green" organization in more ways than one. I believe you would agree that Walker County Master Gardeners have succeeded in becoming more than simply a horticultural education group. As you can tell by our brief history, (41) over the past several years we've undergone an evolution of sorts, and become even more aware and more involved in environmental and ecological issues by promoting the reduction of solid waste through composting and recycling demonstrations, (42) by encouraging the reduction of the use of herbicides and pesticides, and have successfully tied these issues into sound landscape practices which we demonstrate (43) through a variety of community projects and services.

We continue to partner with the City of Huntsville and Walker County by (44) providing them with volunteer assistance for their programs such the new E-Waste collection program, Trash Bash, (45) Walker County Proud Communities Tree program, Keep Texas Beautiful, and so on.

Thankfully, our country is now truly becoming aware of the damage we've been inflicting on our planet and as a result, our city, county and state governments, together with periodicals such as home and garden magazines, TV programs and even commercials, are making us increasingly aware of what we as individuals can do through small life style changes to help get our environment back on track. Walker County Master Gardeners got the environmental message well before it became the popular thing to do and began get the message out to our community residents. While we are a very small fish in an extremely large pond, we believe we are the foot soldiers in getting out the recycle, reuse, and rebuy message at the grassroots level.

(46) As Certified Master Gardeners, we continue to research and develop LEAF-PRO programs, offer seminars and workshops on a variety of topics such as Integrated Pest Management; how to choose, plant, and care for appropriate landscape materials for our area; Waterwise & Firewise Landscaping; Water Harvesting Methods and Systems; and Propagation.

(47) We tailor these programs to suit our audience and get involved with school children and (48) day camp participants, and a wide variety of groups in our communities such as (49) service clubs, garden groups, and seniors groups, and each and every program we present includes a positive solid waste reduction message. (50) We offer many of our programs at evening sessions enabling those with jobs to attend and to learn. And of course, we pass out LEAF-PRO educational brochures such as the one you received today, at every opportunity. (51)

We invite the public to participate in hands-on workshops for such topics as building a rain water harvesting barrel using recycled materials, or the correct method of building and maintaining a back yard compost pile. (52) We provide tours of our facility, which includes our greenhouse and demonstration gardens on a regular basis and love to "wow" our visitors with all we've accomplished in just a few short years. Our Demonstration Garden is still expanding and improving and will probably never be completed. (53)

In April 2008, Montgomery County Master Gardeners in Conroe, TX hosted the Texas Master Gardener Conference, which brought over 700 Master Gardeners together from across the State of Texas. During the conference, we arranged and hosted a tour of our LEAF-PRO facility for many of those individuals. We continue to hear from many of these Master Gardeners who request information on how they might develop a similar program. So not only are we providing education to our county residents, we have truly become a pilot project, and are educating other Master Gardeners state wide who in turn are passing along our solid waste reduction message in their counties. (54) Our LEAF-PRO program was recognized as an official Earth Kind program in 2006, and our programs and projects have been recognized State wide (55) by the Texas Master Gardener Association in 2004, 5, 6, and 7, who presented us with highly coveted awards, a total of eight in all. And we have been recognized by other Master Gardener groups as something to aspire to. In 2007 we reached almost 30,000 of the 61,078 Walker County residents via 41 presentations, numerous seminars and workshops, and through other educational outreach efforts, while donating over 7,300 volunteer hours. Not too bad for a small fish! (56)

When we arrange and provide tours of our facility for children, they are always so receptive and enthusiastic, and are particularly enthralled with our recycling cemetery. (57) The cemetery is a wonderful tool that teaches them that certain packaging products could be with us in landfills forever if we don't take the initiative and time to recycle them. This cemetery leads us into lessons on "how to" and "where to" recycle which they take home to teach mom and dad. (58) The cemetery catches adults by surprise and makes them realize just what takes place in a landfill and how simple it is to make a difference through recycling and composting efforts. (59) Our demonstration garden continues to grow and includes an Earth Kind research rose project; a dry creek (60) drainage system which empties into a rainwater garden and collection pond; an area dedicated to herbs; (61) a Texas Natives garden; and a beautiful garden dedicated (62) to attracting butterflies and birds.

Our community has welcomed our expertise (63) and we accepted an invitation to assist Huntsville Memorial Hospital with the renovation of their landscaping. Our participation relieved them of the expense of hiring a landscape designer as we developed a design plan and plant list for their consideration. Additionally, the County has very recently requested our participation in the landscape planning of the newly erected Storm Shelter built to provide shelter for those individuals from our southernmost counties escaping approaching hurricanes or other disasters. We've already put a team together and are working with County officials to once again come up with a design plan and plant list to meet their landscaping needs. We do not take these honors lightly.

Our speakers, workshops, seminars, and expertise are now in great demand and we realized that our Extension office meeting room was fast becoming inadequate for accommodating large groups and for providing the type of LEAF-PRO workshops and demonstrations best suited outdoors, particularly composting, water harvesting and conservation demonstrations. (64) So once again, we considered going back to H-GAC for further grant funds to construct an outdoor classroom with adjoining ADA-compliant restrooms. (65) The restrooms located on the left side of the classroom, would utilize captured rainfall runoff from the classroom roof. And once again, based on our LEAF-PRO outreach education program, we applied for and received (66) grant funding in 2007 for this important addition to our Demonstration Garden. (67) Walker County Master Gardeners are again providing much of the construction labor for the classroom and restrooms. We are now close to completing this newest addition to our facility, and plan to have a Grand Opening Celebration in the very near future.

We are extremely grateful for the H-GAC Grant funds, which have proven to be a source for inspirational growth of our LEAF-PRO program. (68) But, since we are a non-profit, 501c3 organization, to be successful and have the ability to continue to develop and offer these tremendous programs, and to maintain and provide utilities for the greenhouse, (69) we need a source of revenue. So we raise a variety of plants, herbs, perennial shrubs, and so on, and offer them for sale to the general public per IRS guidelines, tax-free twice a year (70) in the spring and fall. We also offer mini-seminars at these sales, which are proving to be extremely popular.

(71) These sales also provide the perfect venue for distributing and providing recycling and solid waste reduction information. (72) We have managed to successfully combine educational outreach with a way to raise funds.

(73) In order to accomplish all that we do, we have to be efficiently organized, so we've developed a system of committees that tend to the business of, for example, arranging for speakers from within our group, development of programs for presentation to the public, for (74) replanting and maintaining the gardens and keeping garden structures in top notch condition, (75) for propagating and caring for the unbelievable quantity and quality of plants, for pulling us together as a group and keeping us actively involved through social activities, and for keeping the public aware of our horticultural and environmental activities through public service announcements, newsletters, and newspaper articles. The list goes on and on – fifteen committees in all. (76)

Are we busy? Unbelievably!

Have we exceeded our County Agent's expectations? Absolutely!

Are we proud of our accomplishments and believe in what we do?

Without question!

Is our project finished? Not exactly!

More expansion plans are in the works!!!

And another training class begins in January 2009. (77)

So there you have our exceptional LEAF-PRO story. I'm hopeful that you found it informative and that you might take some of what we do and tailor it to suit your own needs and programs. Perhaps there is a Master Gardener group in your county who might be willing to partner with you and your project. So it's certainly worth a phone call to your County Agent to find out if that's a possibility. And by all means, please, give us a call and take the time to come to Walker County for a tour of our educational facility. I promise it's definitely worth putting a car pool together and making the drive.

Thank you so much for your kind attention.

QUESTIONS??

McLaren - 8/17/08