



ground rules

BY SUSAN KARNES * PHOTOS BY RYAN MCDONALD

Every neighborhood needs one.

Each March, as you survey your dandelion crop, (once a newly sodded wonder called a lawn), and ponder flowerbeds thick with Bermuda and thin with actual blooms, he's whistling while he divides gorgeous cannas and asters in weed-free flowerbeds.

By June, you have solved the dandelion problem by calling them wildflowers, but new ones abound. Your petunias have shriveled to a shade of brown fashionable in couture, but not in agriculture, although it is an exact match for the threadbare patch of turf under the sprinkler that only blooms as a monthly water bill that soaks you — and dries up your bank balance.

The minister of mulch, on the other hand, has a showstopper landscape: hibiscus, daylilies and coreopsis in a riot of citrus colors, butterflies and songbirds, flowering desert willows. How, you wonder with envy, does he do it?

Pssst. Here's the dirt the lord of the landscape is a Master Gardener.

And that is very good news. He is at your service.

Master Gardeners, (with capital letters), are more than proficient gardeners. They are a corps of volunteers dedicated to sharing the wealth of their knowledge with their community. Through instruction and demonstration, they happily teach the ins and outs of drip irrigation, compost, insect management, pruning and indigenous plants.

Peeved by perennials? Baffled by bulbs? Parker County's Master Gardeners understand nature's mysterious rhythm, that February is a good time to divide columbine and Mexican petunias, that July is a marvelous opportunity to transplant iris. Better yet, twice a week, they answer calls at the Parker County Cooperative Extension office, (until their green thumbs are blue in the face), to patiently explain how to rid a lawn of nut grass or create a butterfly garden, and to encourage proper soil preparation. Every day of the week, their web sites, how-to books and demonstration gardens are effective teachers offering tips about growing herbs, vegetables and native or adapted plants.

Best of all, their gardening expertise is free. Now, that's dirt cheap.



DID YOU KNOW ?

Master gardening is a national program, and Texas naturally boasts the largest membership in the United States. The Texas A&M University System and its Texas Cooperative Extension Service sponsors each county's Master Gardener Association. After intensive training and internship, every certified master gardener in Parker County agrees to volunteer a minimum of 50 hours each year to beautification and educational projects in the community. Their good works extend beyond the flowerbed. Each year the gardeners host a popular

plant sale in the spring and offer a \$2,000 scholarship to a promising horticulture student.

Gardening know-how and great tips are available from the Parker County Master Gardeners' book, *the real dirt: A Gardening Guide for Parker County*, (available at most area nurseries or from the county extension office), and on their website, www.pcmg-texas.org.

This autumn, intrepid novice gardeners may enroll in intern classes to become certified master gardeners. Enrollment is limited; call the Parker County Cooperative Extension Office for more information: (817) 598-6168. 🍓