

# Master Gardener for Winter

By Ann Marie Caldwell



The winter season can be a harsh time of the year with its long nights, cold temperatures, and limited number of flowers that survive in these conditions. But into the gloom of winter comes the festival of lights and joy, the Christmas season. Mary Duffy, our Master Gardener for winter, represents the spirit of giving that makes this season a memorable time for all. Bright and cheery about everything she does, Mary is a very

versatile lady, whose checkered career path shows only one invariable constant: her profound love of plants. This love comes from dormant roots in her ancestry, since Mary grew up in a household in Houston where no one gardened nor filled the interior of the house with plants. Mary's affinity for the soil goes back to her grandparents, German immigrants who became cotton farmers in Central Texas. There they raised their own food and lived off the land. The only contact Mary had with gardening was the times when her family, the city slickers from Houston, visited their country relatives on the farm. But that was enough exposure for Mary, who, from the time she moved into her own apartment, has filled the interior of her dwellings with a wide variety of houseplants.

The call of the soil was to determine a good part of Mary's professional life as she fluctuated between jobs that took her away from the soil to those that pulled her back. Mary graduated from the University of Houston with a degree in nursing and, as might be expected, worked the next few years in a surgical nursing unit in a hospital in Houston. In 1980, she and her husband left the hustle and bustle of Houston for a more tranquil life in San Antonio. But Mary did not return to her nursing profession. Instead, she got a job at a local nursery just up the street from her home. Of all things, she was hired; to propagate plants! Did she know anything about plant propagation? No, but with training she found that she was a natural for the job. The roots of her gardening ancestors were beginning to make themselves more evident. In her new job Mary found that working with plants was a soothing balm after the stress of her years as a nurse.

When the nursery went out of business, Mary found a job working with Living Interiors, a business that rents out indoor plants to improve the décor of public buildings. Mary's job was to visit these establishments and maintain the plants. Although she had cared for the many plants that had always graced her homes, she had never had any professional training in interior plant maintenance. During the week-long on-the-job training she received, Mary found again that she had a natural ability in this area. According to Mary, this was the best job she ever had. However, after 6 years with Living Interiors, Mary resigned to care for her new baby, only to return some time later to another job working with indoor plants, this time at Milbergers in their Interior Plants Division.

After 2 years at this job, Mary's restive spirit took over and she returned to her nursing profession, working as a nurse at various venues throughout the city until a personal tragedy propelled her onto an entirely new career path. After the sudden loss of her husband in a motorcycle accident, Mary returned to school at St. Philip's College, where she earned two associate degrees, one in Hotel Management and the other in Hospitality Event Management. Her new training led to her final job at Hampton Inn downtown until her retirement in 2011.

Chance again intervened to lure Mary back to her true love: working with plants. Her oldest daughter married the son of a farmer and the young couple decided they wanted to raise vegetables to sell at Farmers Markets in the area. Mary agreed to let them plow up a half acre of her land, but neither the young couple nor Mary knew much about growing vegetables, Mary's daughter having trained to be a beautician and her son-in-law to work in construction. An advertisement for Bexar County Master Gardener Class 56 convinced them that this was one way to get the skills they needed for their new venture. Since Mary was retired, she was the designated person to enroll in the program.

What started out as a dream has turned into a prosperous venture beyond their wildest dreams! Mary's daughter and son-in-law are now full-time farmers on their own 3 acres of land, and they make a good living selling their produce at local Farmers Markets. And Mary has finally found the stability and happiness she had always been searching for. Her days are filled with pleasure and purpose working with plants. One of her greatest joys is working at the Botanical Gardens Greenhouse propagating plants. She has formed a close bond with the "regulars" who show up each week to propagate and chat. Then Mary helps sell the plants she has created at the plant sales, which are held four times a year. Mary's absolute favorite volunteer project is mentoring each new Master Gardener class. She feels that it is very important that these new recruits feel the nurturing care of established Master Gardeners. Mary also loves working with children, and frequently assist Ruby Zavala in her weekend events for children.

When she is not volunteering, Mary is working with the myriad of plants she has both inside and outside of her homes on the outskirts of Bulverde and at Canyon Lake. Mary describes her yard in Bulverde as a jungle, a jumble of plants lovingly accumulated over the years, which are scattered about in a random fashion. The inside of her home is the same, with her houseplants crowding the interior spaces and spilling out onto her patio and tree-shaded yard. In the winter, the rooms of her house, her garage, and her greenhouse are crammed with all the plants that she has loved and cared for during the milder months of the year. A naturally giving person who loves all forms of life, Mary always room for one more plant and one more pet. To her collection of 20 chickens, 5 dogs and 2 cats, she recently agreed to accept 2 Sulcata Tortoise babies from fellow Master Gardener Michael Mangiapane, whose mother tortoise had produced a batch of babies. So, while the days may be short and temperatures cold, Mary is snug and happy amidst this colorful confusion of plants and pets, happier than she has ever been in her life because she has returned to her roots in the soil, where she has found purposefulness and peace.