

Master Gardener of the Year 2019

Bill Swantner

By Ann Marie Caldwell



Bill Swantner, our Master Gardener for the Spring Season, has been selected as the Master Gardener of the Year. As previously published, Bill is a man who has spent a lifetime enriching his own life, the lives of other people, and the environment in which we all live.

Bill's warmest memories from his childhood are of people in his westside San Antonio neighborhood as they spent time outside raking, mowing, and edging their lawns so that when one looked over the manicured neighborhood yards, one had a feeling of peace, of neighbors who cared for their environment and for one another. Bill remembers how these neighbors talked to one another about their yards, swapping information about what worked and what didn't in their beautification projects. As a young boy yanked prematurely out of his bed at 8:00 a.m. to do his share of raking and trimming, Bill listened to the ramblings of his neighbors and deep in his soul was born the desire to continue these conversations, and that is what he has done throughout his life.

Bill's attachment to the soil has its roots in the rich soil of Indiana, where his ancestors worked the family farm. Bill proudly points out the fact that his cousins still work on those Indiana farmlands. His own father, however, chose a different path when he joined the Air Force. He became part of the Security Service as a Russian linguist and settled in San Antonio, where Bill grew up in the westside neighborhood surrounding St. Mary's University.

Bill's own career was to take him on a totally different path from that chosen by his father, first as a music major at the University of Texas and then as a Divinity Major at the Lutheran Seminary of the Southwest in Austin. Just as his trumpet spoke to the souls of his listeners, now his words from the pulpit of Hope Lutheran Church in San Antonio rang out with Jesus' message of renewal and hope to the souls of his listeners, hungry for refreshment and relief from their drab lives in a secularized world. It was just a small step for Bill to show them yet another way to find refreshment and enrichment for their spirits.

As he approached his retirement as Pastor of Hope Lutheran, Bill began to contemplate how he might best continue his service to God and his fellowman in his golden years. He looked at many possibilities but kept coming back to the Master Gardeners. Soon the decision was made, and Bill became part of Class 61.

As a Master Gardener, Bill does what he remembers his neighbors doing when he was a boy and what he did to uplift the souls of others during most of his adult life: he talks! As a member of the Speakers Bureau, Bill goes all over San Antonio and the surrounding area speaking on gardening topics. He speaks to teachers and children as part of Ruby Zavala's

outreach programs. While he is selling plants at the many gardening events in which the Master Gardeners participate, Bill talks to anyone with a question about gardening. Just as he once found joy in sharing the good news of the gospels, he now finds fulfillment in sharing with others additional ways people can renew their spirits as they work to revive the dead soils and dying plants in their natural world.

Bill also knows that knowledge must first be gathered before it can be shared, so he has become an insatiable learner. His first concern was the basics of gardening: the soil. Bill has studied the soils in the area and ways to enrich it. Concern for soil quality naturally led him into composting and, from there, into plant selection and propagation. He gets his information wherever he can: classes, conferences and conversations with other gardeners. Just as he once heard his neighbors doing, Bill swaps gardening information with experts in different fields. He also learns from his own experimentation. As Bill puts it: his yard is his laboratory. He has a greenhouse, where he propagates a wide variety of plants that he regularly gives away. His latest goal is to successfully propagate poinsettias and geraniums.

Bill's message to his fellow gardeners is to follow their passion. Fortunately, for those who have been lucky enough to meet Bill, his passion has always been to change and enrich lives. His greatest thrill is to hear someone say: "Now I understand, and it makes a difference in my life." As we feel the spirit of renewal well up in our hearts, as we again see the miracle of creation begin to emerge in nature, as we turn our grateful hearts to our Creator, who every year brings us through the dark days of winter and renews our spirits through the Spring and Summer months, we can also be thankful for the passionate drive of Bill Swantner and other selfless gardeners like him, who are dedicated to improving people's lives by sharing with them the joy of bringing order and beauty to our natural world. Our congratulations to Bill, who represents the very best our organization has to offer.