

Advice to Grow By

Santa Barbara's Master Gardeners Keep Calm and Garden On



Credit: Courtesy

By **Leslie Dinaberg**

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Working to cultivate home gardeners who want to learn about soil, sustainable landscaping, plant and tree care, and growing their own fruits and vegetables, the UC Master Gardeners of Santa Barbara County are 163 trained and 74 currently active volunteers trained to share their knowledge with the community.

They come from all walks of life. "My class had students just out of UCSB and retirees in their seventies," said Master Gardener Amy Mayfield. "We all loved our crash course in all things related to plants from top professors from UC Davis and Riverside."

Once they've gained some garden knowledge, helping others is a key component of the Master Gardener program. "Volunteering in our community is a great connection to people and plants," said Mayfield. "My go-to place to volunteer is the community helpline because every question makes me use my brain and research skills to find an answer. I love helping at Harry Potter night at the Public Library, too."

While the group is currently observing physical distancing, they are also "encouraging the public to prioritize mental and physical health by gardening, and volunteers are still standing by to answer questions through helplines," said Danica Taber, the Master Gardener Program Coordinator. Volunteers are available to help by phone ([805] 893-3485) or email (anrmgsb@ucanr.edu), and Taber suggested submitting photos along with questions. "Pictures of the problem and details about your plant's history and environment, like watering and fertilizing schedules, daily sun exposure, and location on your property, are helpful."

Not all problems are easy to solve: Earlier this year, the Santa Barbara Zoo's ponytail palms (which are more closely related to yuccas than palms) turned black at the tops. "The problem? Sprinklers in the field behind them would hit them with water on windy days," said Taber. "This was not an obvious diagnosis to make for the zoo horticultural staff, because sprinklers weren't aiming at the ponytail palms, and wind is an invisible, irregular force."

The program, which is part of the UCSB Extension Program and is for anyone interested in a thriving garden, is designed to "empower home gardeners to help themselves by sharing knowledge and resources that are important for their particular gardening challenges," said Taber. Currently in the process of adapting to providing online education, the Master Gardeners offer intensive, practical courses on horticulture, soil and plant nutrition, pests and diseases and their control, plant management, and diagnosis of plant problems, as well as various public outreach events. Said Mayfield, "It's the best bang for your buck if you like people, plants, and knowledge!"

See cesantabarbara.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardener.



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