



Brief History of GVST (as related by Anne Schiller, co-founder)

For quite a while **Alton Fischer** has been suggesting that we document the history of GVST. Well, we're gardeners—not historians—so much of our history lies in people's brains and oral accounts shared at Garden Happy Hours, etc. I thought I'd toss out a few moments in time to get the conversation started. If you have an addition, correction, amplification or clarification to what I've included here—be sure to contact Alton.

Early Beginnings

Legend is correct in saying that we started as a splinter group of the Master Gardeners, 2001 and 2002. For a variety of reasons. Some of us left the BCMG and others chose to stay or 're-up' when offered the opportunity a few years later, becoming active volunteers in both organizations. Today, it's great to have BCMGs as Gardening Volunteers and many GVST folks are also Master Gardeners.

The original 'charter group' of GVST volunteers were all members of **Dr. Jerry Parsons'** R&D plant propagation team working weekly at Ol' Peterson's greenhouse on Seale Rd. We all knew **Calvin Finch** when he led the Bexar County Master Gardeners. At the time we 'splintered', he had become the Conservation Director at SAWS. He saw the potential in a new outreach group that could be called upon to work on a variety of different projects—and that had a "Can do! When do we start?" attitude. So, with his encouragement, we formed our non-profit 501c3 corporation. He suggested that **Tom Harris, Diane Dondero** and I get things organized and compile all the paperwork, probably because we came off as the most verbose and geeky. Diane passed a few years ago and GVST donated a tree to be planted in her memory at Mitchell Lake Audubon Center, one of her favorite places to work.

Once approved by the IRS, the state and other powers, we began working with SAWS as a Conservation Outreach partner, under Calvin's direction. In fact, Calvin was once invited to a mid-East conservation conference to talk about how to engage volunteers in water education outreach. Someday we need to investigate whether there is a Gardening Volunteers of Turkey around.

We publicized an organization meeting for a Saturday morning in July, 2002, and were amazed at the turn-out. Many of the people who attended are still volunteers today.

Roots

SAWS Partnership

One of our first-year fundraising opportunities was helping SAWS with their Low-Flow Toilet Rebates. Volunteers fanned out at events and retail locations to sign up people for the program. The money we raised by assisting SAWS went into the R&D greenhouse fund. I remember a first-year meeting with the CPA who would prepare our tax return. Our bookkeeper and I had to explain how the funds from the Low Flow Toilets related to Laura Bush Petunias and Bush Morning Glories. The downside was that people continued to think that they should bring their old toilets to what was then the GVST office on Culebra Rd., and for months, even after the program ended, our first Volunteer/Event Coordinator Dee Emory and her successor Veronica Gard were greeted on arrival by old toilets that had been dropped off curbside.

Civic Gardening Projects

While GVST's beginnings were at the Ol' Peterson's greenhouse, we quickly were being asked to help other organizations, like SAWS, the City of SA, Parks and Recreation and Texas Forest Service with their projects. Many of them sought us out through **Dee Emory** who had worked with them when holding a similar position with the Master Gardeners.

Early projects included helping SAWS replant their downtown storage service in what is known as Casino Park on the Riverwalk. For our work that morning, SAWS treated us to Mardi Gras beads then a horticulture barge tour of the River. We created a rose and herb garden at the Ronald McDonald House in the Medical Center; volunteered to propagate plants at the City Parks and Rec greenhouse when it was in Brackenridge Park; restored the historic Stillwell House landscape on Ft. Sam Houston and helped to install a xeriscape garden at the Nellie Reddix Center for special education students in the Northside School District. When asked we volunteered to help the local Red Cross clean and replant their headquarters landscape—but Veronica recently reminded me that we then realized that it involved removing a *huge* stand of prickly pear near the building's entrance at East Houston and Commerce! For a couple of years, we also helped SAS shoe employees maintain the parking lot gardens at their main manufacturing and retail location on New Laredo Highway.

We worked with the Presa Community Center, which primarily served senior citizens, to establish a garden that would be planted in a large 'container' that would allow them to create an herb and vegetable garden that they could tend without too much stooping and be wheelchair height. The cost of constructing the huge, raised concrete bed and rock/soil was donated. GVST came in after initial construction was completed. Volunteers **Charles Bartlett** and **Al Del Rio** were advisors (as they often have been) on plants, and how much rock and soil would be required to fill. Imagine a 'container' about 4 feet deep, 4 feet wide and 10-12 feet long. Now imagine how many truckloads of rock and soil would be needed to fill it before planting could begin. Needless to say, it was a very dusty and dirt-filled day!

Just as GVST was getting started, SAWS was helping the Audubon Society establish what is now the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center. An historic house was moved from downtown out to Mitchell Lake. After the house arrived, GVST volunteers were on the scene to install the original native plant garden that still surrounds the house.

About the same time, SAWS had worked with the San Antonio Botanical Garden to establish the Watersaver (demonstration) Garden above the Conservatory. Lots of prep work weeding and spreading garden soil, then laying (and 'stomping') the sod. Finally, the plants arrived. High excitement. But then, alas, we were reminded "there's still mulch to spread".

Essentials Classes

We were lucky to have a former MG Class Coordinator join our ranks at the outset. The first year, we held classes in the small upstairs conference room at the Botanical Garden. We soon outgrew it and talked to San Antonio Garden Center about moving the classes there, and in exchange we had volunteers who wanted to help plant and maintain their landscape. This arrangement lasted for a few years. GVST eventually became members of Garden Center and we are able to use the building for our classes at the reduced rate afforded to member organizations, as part of our annual membership.

Watersaver Landscape Tour

Originally, it was the “Neighborhood Xeriscape Contest and Tour”, started by Texas Agriculture Extension Service (now ‘AgriLife’) when Calvin was overseeing the Master Gardeners. SAWS, Edwards Aquifer and San Antonio River Authority were the first official sponsors. GVST inherited the project a few years later. The original concept was for homeowners to get together to submit their neighborhood yards to win the contest, be on the tour, and also receive a stipend award for a neighborhood project. One of the first winners while we were coordinating the contest/tour was Mission Ridge off Blanco Rd., where GVST Volunteer **Brian Hough** was also the HOA landscape chair. The HOA used their award money to create a xeriscape demonstration garden outside of the entry gate to show homeowners what a watersaving garden can look like. Calvin spoke at the dedication. Drove by it recently and it still looks good!

Garden Happy Hours

SAWS was doing a Saturday morning landscape workshop at the Great Northwest (neighborhoods) Community Center off Bandera Rd. I invited volunteer **Bob Carter** along since he lived in the area and had a great yard. No real formal program, just advice. Bob started talking about the progression of his own landscape and several times invited attendees to stop by and visit for a tour. I thought, “hmm...why not GVST?” So we set a date, expanded the idea with BYOB and appetizers. Happy Hours were born.

It was before Happy Hours, per se, but once **Tom and Gail Harris** invited GVST to their home in Boerne for an ‘up close and personal’ meet and greet with **Mel Bartholomew**, author and founder of the Square Foot Gardening movement. Tom met Mel while he was attending Square Foot Gardening certification school in Utah (Tom factoid: he was the first certified square foot gardening instructor in Texas). Don’t remember exactly why Mel got from Utah to Tom’s house...but we were all invited for an evening with Mel and book signing. **Veronica Gard** and GVST’s administrative assistant at the time, **Carole Fisher**, arranged a great evening that included a local Asian chef whipping up a stir-fry dinner for volunteers in Tom and Gay’s kitchen.

City-Wide Plant Exchange

This is another ‘inherited’ project. The annual Festival of Flowers started in 1997 as a KTSA radio promotion. Still in the planning stages, we called **Calvin Finch** about Master Gardeners being a participant. When we told him that the event would happen in 4 weeks (and on a Sunday afternoon during Fiesta!) it was clear that he thought we were nuts. But—he offered up the idea for the ‘pass-along plant exchange’. Both the Sunday afternoon FOF and the plant exchange were hits. For a couple of years it was a few dozen plants on the floor at Alzafar Shrine...then people caught on and it took off, growing every year thanks to GVST volunteers who are always thinking of ways to make it better and better.

Herb Market and Tussie-Mussies

Sharon Hughes, one of GVST’s charter volunteers, reminded me at this year’s Herb Market about our Herb Market history. The Herb Market was still being held at Aggie Park on West Ave. GVST sold plants, and at a nearby picnic table, a few volunteers created the small tussie-mussie bouquets in baby jar foods that we collected through the year. Volunteers would then roam the event, hoping to sell them for \$1 each. We didn’t hit our tussie-mussie stride until Herb Market moved to the Pearl Brewery and **Rob DeRocher** set up the tussie-mussie production line to look like something you would see in a European flower market. Sales skyrocketed!

Can't mention Herb Market without another aspect. Early on, GVST was in charge of concessions. Volunteers manned the Aggie Park concession booth at where we sold procured sodas, water and pre-packaged snacks.

With the Herb Market's move to Pearl Brewery (before the Pearl Farmers Market), Herb Market organizers asked if GVST could come up with specially-made edibles, and even provided a few recipes. We had just finished doing the Nelly Reddix therapy garden in NSID. The center has a restaurant job training program for their special needs students, so we contracted with them, in order to comply with City health codes (in addition to providing the food, we had to meet City of SA health code standards on food prep, storage, and on-site sales.) There was a mix-up and they doubled our order (yikes). Didn't help that there was a good down-pour that day...and while we sold a lot of what was prepared ...still had lots of sandwiches to deal with. **Nancy and Mac McClintock** knew of a church nearby that had a kitchen for the homeless. That was the year we realized we are gardeners and not caterers!

Fortunately, the Pearl Brewery Farmer's Market took off the following year and people were able to nosh at the vendors' booths.

Alamo Forest Partnership

There seemed to be a lot happening in the early 2000's which meant lots of GVST volunteerism. There was a national initiative to increase the tree canopies in cities across America, for energy conservation and beauty. In San Antonio, the early organizers were CPS Energy, SAWS and the Texas Forest Service. An early GVST assignment was to inventory the trees downtown (number and variety). From there, the program grew to giving away trees in each of the City Council districts. GVST volunteers did demonstrations on how to plant a tree. The local effort became the Alamo Forest Partnership that now sponsors the tree adoptions that GVST volunteers always enjoy working. Representatives of the original coordinators are still involved along with other conservation organizations, including GVST. **Rob DeRocher** represents GVST on the committee. Another GVST volunteer, **Loretta Van Copenolle** also serves on the committee as a representative of the Sierra Club.

Neighborhood Landscape Fairs

Originally, these were called *GINs*, for 'Gardening in the Neighborhood'. Charter GVST Board member **Brian Hough** originated the idea. As the landscape chairman for the Mission Ridge HOA, he knew that what homeowners wanted at that time was information on the plants they could use to save water but still look good in the landscape. SAWS always like the concept and eventually translated GINs into what are now the Neighborhood Landscape Fairs. Some of the GINs were more elaborate than others and might include plant sales, speakers and walking tours— complete with maps of how to get to the yards.

GVST Cookbook

A fun project in an early year—the brainchild of **Nancy McClintock** and some of the greenhouse volunteers. **Ken Wridler**, **Dee Emory's** office manager came up with the name "*From Garden Plots to Kitchen Pots*". Volunteers contributed recipes along with a few notes on growing the vegetables and herbs that were included in the recipes. **Tom Harris** did the layout and the spiral books were assembled on a table at Nancy and Mac's house. We had a Christmas party the year of publication—and volunteers were encouraged to bring their recipe dishes. Yes! We still have about 10 books left. But time has taken a surprising toll. All of the color in the clip art illustrations have faded to black and white! Otherwise, they're in great condition.

Have a GVST Story? Do Tell!

This short and sketchy trip down memory lane was prompted by **Alton Fischer's** suggestion that we ought to

have a history of the organization, and by 'Cheap Gardener' column in the last newsletter where he talked about GVST volunteers at the Warrior Family Support Center. I know he'd like to compile your stories—so track him down at class, future events, or just drop him an Email.