

My husband likes to proudly tell people, "She's a Master Gardener." My response is usually, "No, I hang out with Master Gardeners; I'm still working on it."

I really had no interest in gardening, although several of my friends are avid gardeners and I grew up on my grandparents' farm. It was 2020 - the year of COVID when I was approached by a friend to consider the MGJV program. I had to ask myself - why would I do this? It's a huge commitment. I don't even like gardening!

Six people from our lake community in Brown County became MGJV interns, including me. We attended Zoom classes twice a week and tried to figure out how to get 50 hours of volunteer time in since everything was closed down due to COVID. So I found myself getting up at 7:00 AM, walking down the road with my hoe to work in our community garden. I was still asking myself, "Why are you doing this?" I do love to learn and stretch myself, but why this?

Our group was asked by the Art Club at the lake to create a pollinator garden as part of a community park. After much discussion and planning, we agreed and got to work. Louis, whose home is a garden paradise, was part of our intern cohort and provided the leadership. Together we chose the right spot, researched what to plant, and prepared the soil. We received monetary donations, as well as donations of top soil, fertilizer and plants from local nurseries. For me, the best part was that my grandson, Isaac, who has Down syndrome was an active participant. He was welcomed and given tasks that he was able to do. And he really enjoyed going with me going to the garden throughout the summer to weed, water, and to look for lady bugs, cocoons, and butterflies.

Along with the volunteer projects we participated in to get our 50 hours, we needed 20 hours of continuing education. Still COVID negated in-person opportunities, so I signed up for many webinars and Zooms. This is where I discovered Doug Tallamy. His webinar "Nature's Best Hope," was such an eye opener for me, and I would even put it right up there as being a "life changing" experience. I watched more of his videos and purchased his books. And the misconception that there was much more to yards and landscapes than beauty was revealed to me. I share with anyone who will listen about Homegrown National Park.

My grandson helping with the pollinator garden and Doug Tallamy teachings came together and my purpose came to light.

Since then I treasure the moments I've shared with my grandson in the pollinator garden, at the Veteran's Home weeding flower beds, going to native plant sales, and in our yards nurturing plants. I was shocked to find myself as a presenter at our county fair. And how I wound up as the county coordinator is another puzzlement.

Do I consider myself a Master Gardener? Not yet, but the nuggets of knowledge, companionship and the wonder of nature have brought me so much joy that I never expected to find.

(To those who may be considering the Master Garden Volunteer program, you may be wondering if the hours spent in education and volunteer work during the first year is worth it. I knew I'd embarked on a personal growth opportunity, but I never expected to find the joy. Was it worth it? 100%)

