

# bea walker

BY JAN DAVIS  
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Do you like an outdoor job with lots of dirt, sweat, sore muscles, with a minimum commitment of 75 hours per year? How about not getting paid? Then being a Master Gardner may be just the job for you! Of course, not factored into this equation is the sense of accomplishment, the delight in “detective” work, or the pleasure of helping others. It’s a very selective volunteer job open to just a few Nassau County residents, for which many apply and undergo an intensive screening process.

Ask Bea Walker about the job and she will beam with pleasure and satisfaction, for she was recently named Master Gardner of the Year for the State of Florida. That’s an impressive accomplishment for this beautiful lady with sparkling eyes, who was a corporate executive before arriving in Nassau County. She was Director of Strategic Planning for Xerox and VP of Marketing at Norrell Services, Inc., before self-funding her own temporary placement business in Atlanta. She brought that business to the 9.2 million-dollar level, with offices in Delaware, Memphis, and Atlanta, before closing it to follow her hubby Van Dyke to this area.

Van Dyke is a retired Air Force major, who met Bea at the Fernbank Museum during a “Leadership-Atlanta” function. He was moving here to become Director of Facilities for Jacksonville Airport Authority. When they moved, he told Bea that she really didn’t have to work any more. Well, Bea had always dreamed of being a full-time volunteer, so she plunged into the world of non-profits and applied to become a Master Gardner.

Her only real experience in gardening had come from her mother’s collection of house plants and her grandmother’s

gladioli and vegetable gardens, which had seemed as big as a football field to young Bea. What Bea lacked in experience, she compensated for with a strong marketing background, a deep sense of commitment, and great enthusiasm.

Rebecca Jordi, the Nassau County extension agent, accepted Bea for the nine weeks of training to be a Master Gardener. All Master Gardeners work under an extension agent such as Jordi, a faculty member at the University of Florida. The training includes courses in every facet of Florida horticulture. Once trained, each volunteer promises 75 hours during the first year to answer questions and guide individual homeowners, as well as growing and maintaining designated governmental gardens in the area. Volunteers also conduct experimentation, offer plant clinics, take agriculture into the classroom, and bring students to an “Ag Extravaganza” for demonstrations in many areas of horticulture.

Bea soon rose through the ranks and found new ways to promote the program in the community and establish new methods to retain volunteers. Bea points with pride to the demonstration garden at the county facility, which has an area for native palms, fruit trees, and urban trees.

Bea says, “The Nassau County Master Gardener program was the best kept secret in the county.” With Bea Walker’s hard work, however, the program’s services are now better known and utilized by many in the community. She makes those sore muscles and dirty hands sound so appealing! For more information, contact extension agent Rebecca Jordi at (904) 548-1116.