BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS NEWSLETTER . JUNE 2023

NEWS . EVENTS . GARDENING TIPS. EDUCATIONAL ARTICLES

SOIL

By Teri Marceau

Do you know what soil type is in your yard? Although I am no expert on soil, I do know that my worms can't live outside soil for very long. I could say the same thing about the plants we grow, not including hydroponics. According to the USDA/NCRS article *General Soil Map of Texas*, Coryell, Lampasas, and east Bell counties are located in the Grand Prairie. Grand Prairie soil is generally "*formed on gently rolling to hilly, dissected limestone plateaus and in adjacent, gently sloping valleys. Steep slopes border valleys along major streams, and most soils formed in flat-lying limestones and calcareous shales of Cretaceous age. Shallow soils—including Aledo, Brackett, Purves, and Real—occur on hills and ridges and differ in texture, mineralogy, and organic matter content. Moderately deep Bolar soils occur in similar landscapes. Clayey Sanger soils, which formed in shale parent materials, have shrink-swell properties*." McLennan County is split between Grand Prairie and Blackland Prairie while Williamson County is found on the Edwards Plateau a.k.a. limestone and Blackland Prairie. The western part of Bell County, Falls and Milam soil is the coveted Blackland Prairie.

What does this mean for your gardens? First start with a soil test from the different parts of your garden. This means sample your flower garden separate from your vegetable garden. It is not recommended to use a soil sample kit other than from our local AgriLife office. Kits are also available in the BCMGA Education Office. Follow the instructions. Once you receive the results and need help with reading the analysis, we can help you at the Help Desk.

Like I said above, I am no soil expert by any means. But Patricia Mielnick class of 2019 is a retired soil scientist. She will be speaking at our next Thursday night seminar on June 15th at 6:00 PM in the Learning Center. If you are interested in learning more about the science of soil, please email Outreach at bcmgaspeakers@gmail.com to reserve your seat. If soil excites you, you do not want to miss this seminar.

Check out this article for some valuable information from Aggie Horticulture, called *The Real Dirt on Austin Area Soils* and Texas A&M Forest Services, *Know Your Soils*. Also, the *General Soil Map of Texas* is a great resource for our soil types. Here is the link to the Soil Map https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/texas/texas-general_soil_map-2008.pdf.

Have Gardening Questions? Submit your questions and photos at: bell.mg@agnet.tamu.edu

UPCOMING EVENTS JUNE 2023

Speakers Bureau & Monthly Outreach Seminar
Here is a tentative schedule for upcoming seminars. Please note the bureau will be adding hands-on classes on Saturdays and working in classes on the west side of the county.
June 10 at 9:00am - Edible Flowers Workshop
June 15 at 6:00pm - Soil Science for the Home Gardener (Learning Center)
June 17 at 9:00am - KMCCG Open House (KMCCG)
July 19 at 6:00pm - Texas Superstar (per-annuals, woody shrubs, specialty plants and trees) at the Harker Heights Library & Activity Center.
July 20 at 6:00pm - Hummingbirds and Pollinators (Learning Center)
For more information please email: **BCMGASpeakers@gmail.com**.

WEDNESDAY WORKDAYS: First & Third *Wednesdays, 8:00 to 11:00 am*, is a Master Gardner work day at the Extension Office. We have demonstration beds all around the facility. Bring a friend who may be interested in becoming a MG or just a friend of the BCMGS. Come for an hour or two or four.

General Membership Business Education Meeting: Meets on **June 14th,** at 10:00 a.m.; Fellowship time at 9:30 a.m.
We will meet at the Harris Community Center, 401 N. Alexander St., Belton.

Board of Directors Meeting: Meets on **June 28th,** at 10:00 a.m., in the Education Center (which is in the AgriLife Building).

Burger Wednesday: Burger Wednesday is currently suspended pending an individual or group to volunteer to coordinate the meal. But please join us for our workday and fun fellowship.

Contact April Marek for details at april3481@gmail.com.

Herb Study Group: Meets on the **3rd** Wednesday of the month, **10:00-11:30 AM.** See the Calendar of Events for location as it may fluctuate between the learning center and the extension classroom. June's discussion will be on Tumeric. Please contact Tracy Brown for further information: bcmgtabrown@gmail.com.

Killeen Municipal Court Garden: Meets every Saturday, time varies according to the season. It is harvest season as well and fall garden preparation time, see Calendar of Events
Please contact Dave Slaughter slaughtd915@gmail.com. See VMS for additional Harvest Days to earn extra service hours.

HELP DESK: Monday through Thursday, 9:00 am to Noon & 1:00 to 3:00 pm.

Blooming Bell Newsletter: You can find the newsletter on the Home Page of our Website at **txmg.org/bell** . The deadline for articles is the 1st of each month. Publication will be on the 5th.

Texas AgriLife Extension Service
Horticulture Program in Bell County

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Outreach/Speakers Bureau	Debra Thompson

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

The Board of Directors

By: Teri Marceau

No, you are not seeing things! Typically, this spot is reserved for the Presidents Corner, but due to things on the farm, I will be filling in for Kathy. She will be back next month.

The May Board of Directors (BoD) meeting got off to a bumpy start. At first, we thought there wasn't a quorum and were not going to have our meeting, thankfully enough officers and directors appeared giving us the needed quorum to continue.

In this article I want to open a little window to the happenings of these meetings. We follow the Roberts Rule of Meeting, loosely. Each president decides how closely we follow these guidelines, therefore with the next president things could change.

The directors give a report on their specific project. This is where we learn what is needed and what we can look forward to. For example, the Youth Directors tell where BCMGA has served in the community along with upcoming youth events. The director of the Killeen Municipal Court Community Garden reports on what was harvested, how many youths (8) worked the garden along with the Master Gardeners (35 plus friends). For May the KMCCG harvested 871 pounds of onions, squash, potatoes and cabbage.

The Facilities director reported that no one has stepped up to organize Burger Wednesdays, therefore there won't be this social aspect to the first workday of the month. This has been a wonderful tradition of fellowship following garden work. Therefore, if you think this is something you would like to take on please let April Marek or an officer know.

The awards committee brought to the table an increase for scholarships for completed advanced training classes. There was a lot of discussion and a motion was set forth to increase the budget, but with further discussion by the awards committee and with the treasurer to confirm there is room in this year's budget. This is something that will be readdressed at a future BoD meeting.

The Membership director is still working with Sterling Services to obtain everyone's background check. For review, the background check is required by Texas A&M to be able to maintain our voluntary status. If you haven't completed your background check, you will receive an invitation to complete the check, but you only have 72 hours from receipt to complete it. If you are still having issues, please contact Sherry Oermann.

Finally, the Projects director has created two new projects in VMS. The first new project is for videography for educational purposes. The second is Ask a Master Gardener – Face to Face, to replace site visits and walk ins. He also updated the Christmas Party to the current year.

There was more discussion. You can find the minutes once approved (after the June BoD meeting) on our website. If you have never been to a BoD meeting please join us on Wednesday, June 28th, at 10:00 a.m. in the Education Center.

In The Community

Salado Gardeners

By Susan Terry

Spring has been very busy in Salado. The Thomas Arnold Elementary School Garden has enjoyed the volunteer service of the Salado High School ASTRA Service Club, sponsored by Temple Altrusa. These students volunteered to weed and prep the pollinator beds for spring, and their help was much needed!! After they cleaned the beds a Salado Middle School coach brought a class of boys over to spread 40 bags of mulch in all six beds, which they did in 30 minutes!! If you need it done, ask some bright, hardworking boys!! New plants were added to all of the beds to create a beautiful environment for the birds, butterflies, and students.

The 3rd grade learned about the regions of Texas and planted wildflower seeds in the Texas shaped flowerbed at the "Seed Stomp," and the kindergarten planted pumpkin seeds in the pumpkin patch in anticipation of Halloween!

The vegetable garden was planted in early April and has been harvested by the students several times. We have lettuce, snap peas, beets, carrots, potatoes, and squash. The school cafeteria enjoys the produce!! The tomatoes and cucumbers and still developing. Families will tend the garden weekly during the summer, and harvest the produce.

All of this was possible thanks to Grants from the Nature Company of Salado and the Salado Ladies Community League, and the help of the First Monday Gardeners who helped with planting and guided the ASTRA club weeders. Our Master Gardener and Master Naturalists friends are essential to our success in the TAE Garden and at the Salado Museum and Sirena Gardens.

Visit Salado and enjoy the gardens! Happy Spring.

Some of the ASTRA students cleaned this overgrown bed, and weeded around the bluebonnets with Crystal's help in another.

Continued on next page...

Middle School Mulch Crew

3 rd Grade Seed Stomp

Spring Harvest: lettuce, beets, potatoes

Planting Pumpkin seeds

Fire ant treatments

By Wizzie Brown

Ways to manage fire ants can be broken into two basic categories- broadcast treatments and individual mound treatments. Individual mound treatments treat one mound at a time and are labor intensive, requiring you to search and find every fire ant mound for treatment and can result in more pesticide being applied to the environment. Broadcast treatments spread product (granular or bait) over a large area using specialized equipment.

Individual mound treatments include pouring boiling water onto the mound, using insecticide mound drenches, spreading insecticide granules over top of the mound and watering them in, sprinkling insecticidal dusts on top of the mound or using bait-formulated insecticides around the perimeter of the mound. Sometimes people like to concoct or recommend home remedies using ingredients from the kitchen, but most of these do not kill fire ant, but cause them to a move their mound 1-2 feet away.

Bait-formulated insecticides most often consist of a defatted corn cob grit coated with soybean oil; the active ingredient- what kills the pest- is dissolved in the soybean oil. The soybean oil is what is attractive and consumed by the fire ants as fire ants do not eat solid food. Worker ants collect bait as a food source and take it back to the colony to share with other ants, including the queen(s). Depending on the active ingredient, bait may cause the queen to either die or be unable to produce viable eggs, leading to gradual death of the colony. When using baits, results may be slower to observe when compared to individual mound treatments, but can provide 80-90% suppression for 12-18 months. A bonus to broadcasting baits is that the amount of active ingredient is generally very small- baits are usually broadcast at a rate of 1-1.5 pounds per acre, which places less chemical into the environment.

With any pesticide treatment, *read and follow all label instructions*. Make sure to water in the pesticide **if the label instructs you to do so**. Failure to water in chemicals when recommended by the label does an inadequate job of killing the ants. Baits should not be watered in or used before a rainfall event; baits will not be picked up by ants if they get wet.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600.

Landscaping with Native Plants

by Dawn Woodcock

Word is getting out about the benefits of using native plants. Sixty-four people attended the May 18th seminar on landscaping with native plants at the BCMGA's learning center. Christy Reese did an excellent job presenting with help from Debbie Thompson, who prepared the information slides for the presentation, and Carol Morisset, who showed some of the live plants as they were discussed.

Christy went over some of the benefits of using plants native to our area in our landscapes. Native plants are well adapted to our weather and soil. They are often drought tolerant and low maintenance. They provide habitat and food for native pollinators, birds, and other wildlife. Christy advised the audience to do their research about a plant before buying it. She pointed out that no native plants are invasive, but some are spreaders. That cute little plant at the nursery may spread or reseed vigorously. You can't rely on the plant labels at the big box stores, as they may not be specific to our region. Before you buy, you will want to know the mature size of the plant, its growing habit, whether it will it grow well in the conditions you have in your landscape, or even whether it might be poisonous if ingested by pets or people. Christy commented that some plants can grow under a range of sunlight (full sun, partial sun, or full shade). However, most blooming plants want to be planted in full sun to get full blooms.

Detailed information was presented on twenty-six beautiful shrubs, vines, and grasses that are native to our area. The information presented included each plant's profile, growing conditions, suggested uses, and special notes (i.e. deer resistant or attracts hummingbirds). Christy shared her own insights based on her personal experience with many of the plants. Live plants were available for closer inspection at the front of the room.

If you didn't go to the seminar, you missed an awesome presentation. The good news, though, is that the "Landscaping with Native Plants" presentation is now available on the Bell County Master Gardener's website home page at txmg.org/bell.

Presenter Christy Reese

Mealy Blue Sage information

Carol Morisset

Tomatoes and Peppers for a Fall Garden, Part 1

By Wayne Schirner

We're still officially in Spring, so why am I writing about fall gardening? Fall is a great time for growing peppers and tomatoes. Both are plants that grow well in the hotter temperatures of the summer and by the time they are mature enough to flower and set fruit, the temperatures have cooled enough to allow that to happen. I have had my best production of both by planting for a fall garden. If you haven't grown either of these crops in the fall, hopefully you'll try it.

Tomatoes and peppers are two crops that require some advanced planning if you want to grow them for a fall crop. In Bell County, pepper transplants can be set out in the garden during the last week of July and the first week of August. Tomato transplants can be set out in the garden between the second week of July through the first week of August. In my experience, it has been difficult to find fresh transplants locally during July, and if you do find some fresh transplants, the variety selection is frequently quite limited. That leaves you with starting your own transplants from seed. Both tomatoes and peppers need 6-8 weeks from seed planting to having a transplantable seedling. That means they need to be started **now**! The rest of this article will focus on propagation from seeds.

There are many reasons for starting seeds indoors. If you rely on purchasing seedlings, the selection available can be very limited. Starting your own seeds allows you to grow varieties that would otherwise be unavailable. Only three things are required for germination of most seeds. Appropriate heat, moisture, and oxygen are all that are needed for most seeds to germinate. A minority of seeds require light, and the seed packet will tell you if light is required. In the case of tomatoes and peppers, light is not required for germination.

Different seeds germinate at different temperatures, but most germinate best in the 65-75F range. At a soil temperature in the 65-75F range, germination of many crops will occur in 5-6 days. Tomatoes and peppers take longer to germinate at typical indoor temperatures, germinating fastest at temperatures in the 80-85F degree range. This can be achieved using a heat mat with a thermostat that allows you to set the temperature to a specific value. As soon as seedlings appear, a heating mat is no longer recommended. A heat mat isn't an absolute requirement, but it can shorten by half the days for seedlings to appear.

Seeds are usually dormant until they have consistent moisture. It is important that a seed being germinated be continuously moist. Humidity domes or plastic wrap can be used to maintain moisture until the seed has germinated. Once germination has occurred, remove the dome or plastic wrap to prevent excess moisture.

Finally, seeds require oxygen for germination to occur. No special efforts need to be taken to provide oxygen because it is in the air all around us.

Seed germination does not require a growing mix. A popular way to germinate seed is in a plastic baggy. Place a folded paper towel in a snack sized baggy, moisten the paper towel, place seeds on top of the moist paper towel and then place it on a counter with the seeds down. Seed roots naturally grow downwards, and you don't want the roots growing into the paper towel. Once the radicle (root) appears, you know that seed is viable and can now be placed in a seed starting mix to continue growing.

Once a seed has germinated, most seeds need a growing medium for growth of the seedling. Hydroponics is beyond the scope of this article, so I am only talking about the growth of seedlings that will eventually end up planted in a garden or container. A seed starting mix is preferred for best results. Seed starting mixes are finer in texture and looser than regular potting soil. It is recommended to never use regular garden soil. In fact, most seed starting or seed growing mixes are soil-less mixes. From this point on, when I use the term "soil" I am talking about a soil-less growing medium.

Continued on next page ...

I start seeds in the cells of a 6-pack, whether I plant one seed per cell or 10 seeds per cell. Make sure you have a system to identify which seed type is in each cell. After moistening the seed starting mix and placing the seeds in the mix, I use plastic wrap to cover the seed starting container. I flip the plastic wrap daily if I see condensation on the underside of the plastic wrap. That reduces the amount of excess water that might be present. Once seedlings have appeared, they must have light. That can be accomplished indoors with grow lights set to be on for 16 hours a day. Another potential option that can be used this time of year is to place them outside as soon as they appear. That would eliminate the need to harden them off before transplanting into the garden. I'm doing some comparisons this year to determine how viable that option is.

Seedlings generally grow best with some heat. If you are growing your seedlings indoors, the usual temperature of your home will be adequate. Water remains a critical factor in growing seedlings. During germination, the seed needs to be continuously moist. Once germination has occurred and the plant is growing, excess water can be just as harmful as inadequate water. If the soil surface is too moist, the risk of a fungal disease that causes damping off is high. Humidity domes or plastic wrap should be removed once the seedlings have emerged from the soil. Bottom watering is preferred over top watering, but careful top watering can be done if you keep the top of the soil from being soggy wet. Check your plants frequently. If they are too dry, water them. If they are too wet, don't water. It really is that simple.

A seed contains all the nutrients required for germination and initial growth. Once the seedling has 3 sets of true leaves, nutrients may become necessary. Many seedling growers use a liquid fertilizer, mixed to half strength according to the instructions on the product. You shouldn't need to fertilize more than once a week. Some purchased seed growing mixes already contain a fertilizer, and no additional fertilization is required. Too much fertilizer can be just as harmful as too little.

By the time the seedling is 3-4 inches tall with three sets of true leaves, up-pot to 3.5" sized pots filled with a grow mix where they will continue to grow until they can be transplanted outside.

That should be enough information to get you started on having healthy transplants of tomatoes and peppers of the varieties that you want. While you are waiting for the seedlings to grow, start preparing your garden or containers to be ready to accept the transplants at the appropriate time. Next month, Part 2 will discuss up-potting seedlings and transplanting into the garden or container. Happy Gardening.

Seed starting set-up with a thermostat controlled heat mat.

Up-potting to 3.5" pots.

The end result!

KILLEEN MUNICIPAL COURT COMMUNITY GARDEN REPORT

By Randy Brown

27-5-2023

Nine Master Gardeners and a visiting daughter worked this Memorial Weekend. It was a Warm, Humid, Partly Cloudy day in the garden. 423 lbs of squash, zucchini, onions, potatoes, green peppers and garlic harvested for Friends in Crisis Shelters. Weeding and watering maintenance accomplished

Texas Superstar of the Month

Lindheimer Muhly Grass

Muhlenbergia lindheimeri

By Sylvia Maedgen

This perennial is an ornamental clump forming, tough, native Texas, warm season grass. It is drought tolerant and performs outstandingly across a wide spectrum of climates and soils, which makes it well suited for Texas. It is hardy to Zone 7 and possibly Zone 6.

This variety of grass is considered a low water use plant, especially in sandy soils which means it will require regular watering in the Texas heat when rainfall is scarce. It is a valuable addition in rain gardens or wet areas to help with soil erosion and storm water to infiltrate the soil when planted in groups. It adapts to soils with a wide range of pH and soil textures, but needs reasonable drainage.

It has a rounded to fountain-shaped canopy and is composed of long arching aqua to blue-green, strap-like, keeled leaves. The plant foliage grows to about 3-4 feet tall and spreads to about 3-5 feet wide. The flower stalks will extend for about another foot beyond the foliage. This grass has lovely pale-gray inflorescences (the complete flower head to include stems, stalks, bracts, and flowers), which are called panicles in grasses and will bloom from summer to fall. The flower panicles will open with a hint of purple-red, turning silver-white to gray-white as they mature and eventually light brown or gray-brown as seeds ripen. The leaves and flowers help soften landscapes when many other plants are dormant. The plumes of flowers can be used as fresh or dried-cut flowers.

This grass prefers full sun, but will tolerate light shade. Plants are semi-evergreen in warmer parts of our region, but in colder portions the foliage dies back to near ground level each winter. You will want to cut back your grass to about 6 inches in late winter or early spring, before you begin to notice new growth. You can fertilize in the spring and maybe the summer, but let them go dormant in the fall.

The grass works well as a specimen grass, intermediate size screen, background plant for summer annuals, or component of mixed sunny borders. The plants can be used to soften harsh landscape structures.

Resources: https://texassuperstar.com/plants/lindheimer-muhly-grass/index.html

AgriLife Today, Adam Russell, September 18, 2019

Central Texas Gardener – www.centraltexasgardener.org

Horticultural Myth of the month, June 2023

By Wayne Schirner

Ah, it's the time of the year when the tomatoes and peppers we planted in March are showing fruit. Then we notice that the ends of some of the fruits are turning dark brown or black and leathery. This is blossom end rot or BER. What is it, and what do we do?

The claim: Use a foliar spray with a calcium solution to treat BER.

At the 2023 TMG State Conference, there was a talk on growing peppers given by one of the AgriLife Agents. For the most part, it was an interesting talk, even though it was focused on commercial growing with large fields of monoculture, in this case peppers. I'm always a little cautious about talks like this because information from commercial agricultural practices isn't always applicable to horticulture in home gardens. Since there are more studies done for agriculture than home gardens, sometimes that's our only option for science-based information. At least the information about different pepper varieties was interesting. He talked about some of the diseases that can affect peppers, and other common conditions. He showed a photo of peppers with BER and did mention that irregular watering was probably the primary underlying cause of BER in the numerous different crops that can be affected. Then he said that foliar sprays with a calcium solution could be effective in preventing or treating BER. Since this was coming from an Extension Agent at the State Conference, it must be correct, right?

BER is associated with a calcium deficiency in the developing fruit, even if abundant calcium levels are present in the soil. There are many non-.edu sites that promote adding a variety of things to the soil to improve the amount of calcium in the soil. Some promote eggshells to add calcium, or Tums, while other sites promote the use of Epsom salts. None of these have been shown to help reduce BER. Nutrient uptake by plants is carried with water from the soil through the roots, plant, fruit, and leaves, pulled by transpiration from the leaves. Most nutrients, including calcium, travel through the xylem and this is a one-way system. How could a foliar spray help? I did some research, looking only at .edu sites to see if I could confirm what he said about calcium foliar sprays. I started with tamu.edu sites and found none citing research showing that foliar sprays of calcium helped to reduce BER. I found numerous .edu sites that addressed foliar sprays to treat BER. Theses links from Clemson and Florida best summarize what I found:

https://hgic.clemson.edu/gardening-myths-fix-blossom-end-rot-with-calcium-sprays/

https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/SS497

I also looked at articles that addressed foliar spraying of numerous nutrients and found this one from Missouri to be interesting. Calcium is one of the nutrients that is difficult to supply by foliar feeding, and in their comment about BER they indicated that for it to help, it had to be used when fruits were just being formed. That is prior to when we usually see evidence of BER.

https://ipm.missouri.edu/MPG/2019/4/foliarFeeding/

In addition, I want to include links to the sites I most often use for information on horticulture myths. These two sites discuss foliar feeding in general:

https://www.gardenmyths.com/foliar-feeding-gardeners/#more-7342

https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/403/2015/03/foliar-feeding.pdf

Finally, I wanted to share this article that focuses on BER, since there are things other than calcium transportation that can lead to BER. Note from this article that excess magnesium is one of the nutrients that can compete with the uptake of calcium from the soil. Explain to me again why Epsom salts are used by some to prevent BER.

https://ucanr.edu/sites/placernevadasmallfarms/files/86509.pdf That's it for this month. Happy Gardening!

What is YOUR super-power?

By: Teri Marceau

Did you miss the Spring Fling last month? If you did you missed all the fun. It was the first time since I became a Master Gardener in 2019 that the Spring class's graduation was presented before the whole association. County agent, Floyd Ingram addressed the graduating interns and Randy Brown provided our MG photo backdrop for photos with our agent and president, Kathy Love. Sylvia Maedgen and crew planned a delicious buffet of food and beautiful tables to eat and fellowship.

We played a fun version of plant bingo. The best part was half the room burst out "BINGO" in unison; followed a few minutes later when the other half yelled "BINGO". The idea was to promote unity which I believe was achieved. I asked everyone, "what is your super-power?". The thought was that you fill out the questionnaire in the hopes it would lead to stimulating conversations. As I visited tables I heard, "I don't know what my super-power is" and "I don't have a super-power". I hadn't thought through this exercise very well, which caused some confusion. I discovered that it would be better to ask a friend what your super-power is. For example, speaking with Gail Christian she said she didn't have any super-powers, but I immediately exclaimed, "yes you do, you are an historian". That brief conversation confirmed our friends know us better than we know ourselves, at least in this case.

Let's try it again. A super-power is an ability you feel great using whether at home, with your family or community organizations. Some examples of super-powers are communicating, editing, making connections, teaching, planning, history, etc. The goal is to use our talents to benefit our projects, BCMGA as a whole, and the people of Bell County,

I challenge you to ask a friend, "What is my volunteer super-power(s)?". Then ask yourself the following, "how can I use my super-power(s) towards meeting our association's mission and our community and what project or committee will benefit from my super-power?". Jot them down and send them to me via email or bring them to the June general membership meeting. You might find that your talents are needed in projects and or committees you have not served on before. Embracing your talents will fuel the forward motion of BCMGA and set the foundation for the next 25 years.