



THE GREEN

 *SAN MARCOS* 

RIVER, GARDENS, AND LAND

The San Marcos River has brought a steady stream of people from diverse backgrounds and varied interests into the local environment. Some whose efforts are focused on preserving the river by working toward uniting the community through festivals; and those who have focused their attention on the land itself, by protecting its use, and toiling over it until it bears fruit.



Texas Wild-rice
(Zizania texana)

Listed Endangered,
4/26/1978

“If Poteet can have a strawberry festival, if Luling can have a watermelon thump, shouldn’t San Marcos have a celebration about its endangered species?”



Ashley Wright
texaswildricefestival.org
FB/TexasWildriceFestival

The San Marcos Springs are rich in history

Discoveries from the area include ancient Clovis spear points and Mastodon bones.

Archaeological studies indicate a history of human habitation spanning back over 12,000 years.

It begins further upstream. Spring Lake, the iconic pool fed by more than 200 springs, is believed to be one of the longest continually inhabited sites in North America.

Visitors of The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, formerly known as Aquarena Center, can see the springs in all of their bubbly glory. The daily glass bottom boat tours, which began in 1951, are sometimes people’s first educational experience with nature.

Aquarena Center was established as an educational center in 1994 when Texas State University purchased the land. Following the university’s educational evolution and a \$1 million donation from the Dallas-based Meadows Foundation in August 2012, the center was renamed The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, after a 2002 and 2005 name change.

The center continues to work toward ensuring sustainable water resources, and restoring the springs property to its natural state.

Ashley Wright, a former Meadows Center employee, remembered the epiphany she had as a glass bottom boat tour guide.

Wright had spent many days educating the public about the endangered and endemic species of the upper San Marcos River, one of the most biologically diverse aquatic ecosystems known in southwestern United States.

But she realized that the majority of the San Marcos residents she knew hadn’t been to the center and didn’t know much about the unique resource that runs through the city – their city. A city that’s home to the fountain darter, Comal Springs riffle beetle and dyropid beetle, Peck’s cave amphipod, San Marcos gambusia and salamander, as well as the Texas blind salamander and wild rice.

Out of the eight endangered species, the Texas wild rice stood out to the Texas State alumna because of its symbiotic relationship with the river and, in turn, humans.

This aquatic grass wiggles its strands underneath a small portion of the constantly cool San Marcos River, completely immersed in its swift current. Floods and recreational river users can uproot the plant, while drought can dry it out or expose it to herbivores.

“Texas wild rice requires a steady current of water to stay alive, and because of that, there are limitations on how much water can be taken from the springs to ensure the plant’s survival,” said Wright of her reasons why she is raising awareness and working to protect it.

The idea for the inaugural Texas Wild Rice Festival was just a dream she had. That is until December 2012.

Wright said she began collaborating with friend and former Meadows Center coworker, Samantha Beasley, on the festival, which aims to show what’s possible when a community celebrates and educates.

“If Poteet can have a strawberry festival, if Luling can have a watermelon

thump, shouldn't San Marcos have a celebration about its endangered species?" Wright said.

Through a series of events, Wright said she met several influential people in the local environmental communities, some of whom urged her to have the inaugural festival last August.

There wasn't enough time. So, the festival was put on hold and promoted at a one-time-only River Awareness Day last August at City Park.

More than 40 booths wound through City Park and workshops on homemade sunblock to composting took place throughout the day. The only problem was the view.

Wright said people enjoyed the festival but weren't able to see or interact with the river. That's why this year the inaugural event will take place April 11 and 12 at Sewell Park.

San Marcans will still have the opportunity to make the festival their own by sponsoring a booth, donating to the online Indiegogo campaign and attending the event itself.

"... Because of the way our city's growing so quickly and so rapidly, we want to build a bridge for everybody to come together over

water," said Wright, adding that the more people know about the river, the more likely they will be to make informed decisions about local development.

Since 1998, the San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance has been working with developers, the City of San Marcos, Hays County and other governmental entities to help protect the water supply and habitat of native animals and plants through the creation of interconnected parks and natural areas.

Todd Derkacz, president of the San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance, said that natural areas remind and keep people in tune with nature. The Pennsylvania native said it's when people have a personal respect for nature and live those values that they can become a part of the larger conversation.

And Derkacz wanted to continue to live those values and become a part of the conversation that was happening in San Marcos. He remembered hearing the call to action by the founder of the San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance at the annual Sights and Sounds festival.

The San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance and its members have advocated and campaigned for natural areas in San Marcos for more than a decade. There are currently five natural areas

in the city. The organization continues to work toward expanding the Purgatory Creek Natural Area so the trails can lead people to the San Marcos River. Expansion in other local natural areas is also expected.

Derkacz can be seen riding his bike from his sustainable home to local coffee shops to pick up used grinds for composting. He said his wife, Betsy, is a certified master composter.

"We're very aware of our carbon footprint," Derkacz said.

San Marcos resident Leah Gibson is also mindful of her steps. As manager of the Dunbar Neighborhood Garden, Gibson said she has learned to work with nature, not against it.

This Texas State alumna walks about a block every day, when the weather is permitting, to her garden plots, the place where she has grown produce for years now and where she grew the flowers for her wedding.

Her thumb got a little green eight years ago when she purchased a plot at the San Marcos Community Garden behind St. John Catholic Church.

"This community is really phenomenal," Gib-



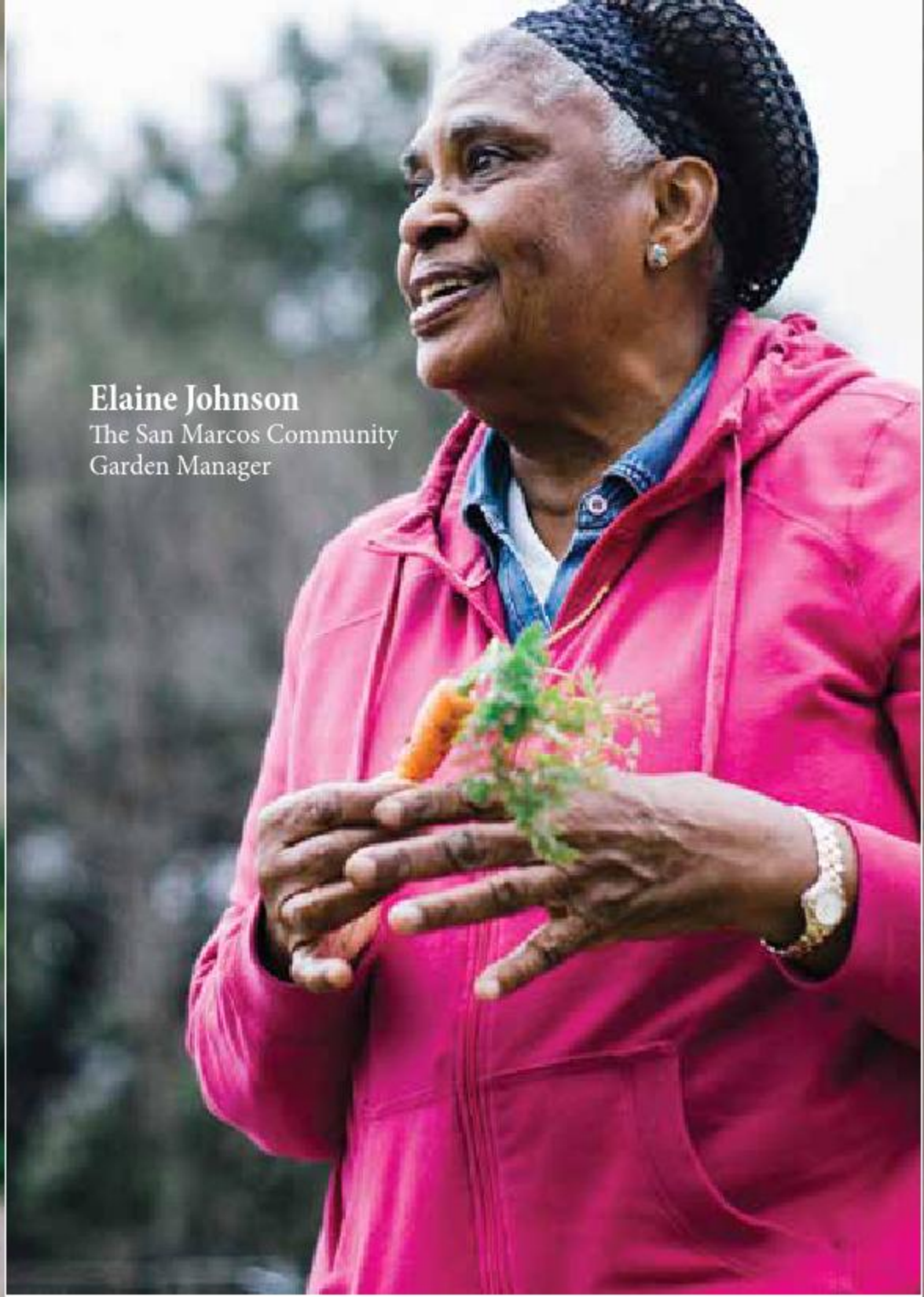
"We're very aware of our carbon footprint."

Todd Derkacz
smgreenbelt.org
FB/SMGreenbeltAlliance





Leah Gibson
Dunbar Neighborhood
Garden Manager
smgardens.org/dunbar
FB/DunbarNeighborhoodGarden



Elaine Johnson
The San Marcos Community
Garden Manager

son said. She was 20 years old and admitted that she didn't know a thing about gardening.

As the seasons changed and the person she took to the garden on a first date turned into her boyfriend then husband, Gibson committed herself to gardening and helping to choose which direction the City of San Marcos goes.

Last month, the Dunbar Neighborhood Garden installed a permaculture-based orchard or, what Gibson described as a "mini food-forest," using native and adapted fruit-bearing trees and edible perennials (think apple trees).

Because the garden is on city property, Gibson said it'll be the first public orchard in San Marcos and that the bulk of the food produced will be donated to the Hays County Food Bank to supplement the organization's existing garden plots that are already producing fruits and vegetables for its clients. Gibson added that the public orchard will eventually serve as an educational exhibit.

Another garden, The San Marcos Community Garden also provides food to the Hays County Food Bank, according to garden manager Elaine Johnson.

Though many plants have suffered this winter, Johnson said she was able to take 40 pounds of food from abandoned garden plots to the food bank.

Johnson, making sure to not step in ant piles that litter the 30-year-old garden, said she is looking forward to the spring with the hopes that her two plots – and the others that remain in the garden – will once again flourish.

Dunbar opened in May 2012, followed by the Alamo Neighborhood Garden. Now, Gibson said, there's a need for a third neighborhood garden, hopefully on the city's east side, because more people are empowering themselves through gardening and becoming more food self-sufficient.

Wright has seen San Marcos change during the seven years she has called the city home. She goes with the flow even when she's travelling—showing people she meets pictures of and discussing the San Marcos River. This body of water is her identity and the identity of the city and all of its inhabitants big and small.

It is this spirit of solidarity that has kept Wright on a path of environmental education. She is working with the San Marcos Arts Council and the San Marcos Nature Center to get the employees and students of San Marcos Independent School District involved with the Texas Wild Rice Festival.

"... They're all about giving children the power to make a decision and giving children the power to affect the future and especially the children that live here are the next wave to come after us, I mean, it's good to plant the seed."