



Mercer Botanic Gardens

VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK



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WELCOME

Welcome to Mercer Botanic Gardens, a Harris County Precinct 4 facility under the leadership of Commissioner R. Jack Cagle.

Since opening to the public in 1974, Mercer has flourished with the help of a strong volunteer organization that assists with all aspects of the gardens by working side-by-side with the staff. Volunteers maintain the gardens, propagate plants in the greenhouses, lead educational tours, catalogue plant specimens for the herbarium, and plan special events. Mercer's large volunteer corps is instrumental in organizing March Mart, the largest fund-raiser plant sale in southeast Texas.

Mercer's volunteer community includes plant and nature enthusiasts of all ages and skill levels including Texas Gulf Coast Gardeners, Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists. A variety of groups such as church, high school, N.J.R.O.T.C., Eagle Scouts, and the National Charity League involve many youth in volunteerism at Mercer. Additionally, corporations such as ExxonMobil, H-E-B, Starbucks, and HP provide service teams that work on garden projects.

Mercer's volunteer organization is continually growing and we want everyone to know who you are! Please be sure to introduce yourself to staff, other volunteers, and garden visitors.

We look forward to working with you!



MISSION STATEMENT

In pursuit of an enhanced quality of life through a greater appreciation of the essential value and beauty of the plant world, Mercer Botanic Gardens seeks to establish and maintain a versatile botanical facility for the greater Houston area, serving the general public, horticulture industry, and scientific community.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Mercer recognizes the important role of volunteers in providing a quality experience to the thousands of visitors to this facility each year. Since you represent Mercer, it is essential that you become familiar with Mercer's background and policies. Mercer offers gardening programs, guided tours for adult and school groups, nature programs for children, and special events for the general public.

This handbook outlines the basic philosophy and purposes of Mercer, along with the many service opportunities and volunteer procedures.

I. Location

Mercer Botanic Gardens
22306 Aldine Westfield Road
Humble, Texas 77338-1071
Phone: 281-443-8731 Fax: 281-209-9767

II. Hours of Operation:

Please refer to the website and Visitor Center for current hours of operation.

8 a.m. to dusk from March through October

8 a.m. to 5 p.m. from November through February

Website: www.hcp4.net/community/parks/merc

Mercer closes only on Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and New Year's Day



III. Mercer's History



Thelma Mercer's Arboreal Legacy

In the late 1940s, Thelma and Charles Mercer purchased 14.5 acres of East Texas Piney Woods and began building a masonry home, which now functions as the Volunteer Center. Before the roof was completed, the area flooded. Water spilled over the banks of Cypress Creek and backed up to Treaschwig Road, covering most of the property. After the flood, the Mercers established a new home site at a higher elevation about 50 feet south of the original homestead. This wooden house later functioned as the park's staff building for 25 years. Subsequent flooding damaged the structure and the current elevated staff building is located in the footprint of the old home.

Thelma and Charles chose this property for the many special trees that are still part of the Mercer landscape. Thelma was an avid horticulturist and did much of the initial selective clearing to preserve and enhance the desirable native trees, such as dogwoods, rusty blackhaw viburnum, and several species of hawthorns. Thelma planted large camellias throughout the central gardens and introduced several exotic tree species, such as ginkgo, bauhinia, Philadelphus and camphor, which are still growing beautifully.

The Mercers had a dream of sharing their small private garden with the community and wanted to preserve their special oasis. Thelma approached Harris County officials about purchasing the property to use as a public educational and horticultural facility. In 1974, Harris County purchased the 14.5 acres. Volunteers from the community played an early role in the care and further development of the gardens, and today Mercer Botanic Gardens continues that tradition through a very active volunteer program.

In 1983, \$3 million was allocated for major expansion and development. Then in 1984, an additional 200 acres of adjacent land was purchased, followed by the acquisition of 38 acres in 1993, and 2.37 acres in 2000. The purchase of the 2.37-acre tract added the highly important piece of property that serves as the connecting passageway alongside Cypress Creek from the east side gardens to the lily pond, the tea house, and other attractions. Purchase of the land guarantees permanent access to those areas and prevents commercial development in the heart of the gardens.

To address area-wide flooding, the Army Corps of Engineers channeled Cypress Creek by dredging, making it wider and deeper. The dredging spoil provides the elevations that give character to the azalea berms today. If you look closely at these hills, you may see freshwater mollusk shells from the creek bottom. Today, Mercer spans more than 325 acres of East Texas Piney Woods showcasing the region's largest collection of native and cultivated plants. Aldine Westfield Road divides the facility into two special-use areas: the east side is home to the botanic gardens with over 30 acres of developed gardens including herb, ginger, fern, daylily, tropical, bamboo, endangered species collections, color displays, and two miles of walking trails. The west side of Aldine Westfield is home to the arboretum that includes a picnic area with tables and grills, two barbecue pavilions, and three miles of walking trails that wind through beautifully preserved woodlands and wetlands with environmental interpretation.

Experienced staff and volunteer horticulturists, botanists, and naturalists with a wealth of knowledge and information are glad to assist you in learning more about Mercer Botanic Gardens.

IV. FAST FACTS

- Mercer is part of the Harris County Precinct 4 Parks Department.
- Admission is free!
- Mercer is located one mile north of FM 1960, just north of Bush Intercontinental Airport.
- Mercer's total acreage is 325 acres.
- There are approximately 30 acres of landscaped gardens.
- There are approximately 5 miles of nature trails.
- The gardens and most of the buildings are wheelchair accessible.
- The facility is open 361 days a year.
- Mercer is assisted by over 300 volunteers.

VOLUNTEER INFORMATION

VOLUNTEER BENEFITS

1. Special Volunteer Events
 - Annual volunteer recognition event (April)
 - Annual picnic (October)
 - Special field trips
2. Excellent Training
 - Scheduled training and refresher courses
3. Publications
 - Volunteer newsletter, *The Leaflet*
4. Sense of Appreciation
 - Hours of volunteer service are recognized
 - And most importantly, a sense of deep appreciation and satisfaction for your work at Mercer
5. Your volunteer hours may transfer into monetary contributions. Many companies have matching fund programs and encourage employees, retirees and their families to volunteer. Please check with your volunteer coordinator for more information.
6. Volunteer Recognition Membership (VRM) awarded by The Mercer Society (TMS) to all volunteers that contribute over 200 hours annually.
7. Great Working Conditions!



VOLUNTEER POLICIES

The staff at Mercer Botanic Gardens is committed to providing quality programs and services to the community, and volunteers provide the necessary assistance to carry out these services. A volunteer is any individual who donates time, services, goods, and/or money to facilitate Mercer programs. Mercer recruits and enrolls volunteers without regard to race, age, sex, religion, color, national origin, or physical ability. Special accommodations may be made upon request. Volunteers under the age of 16 must be accompanied by an adult at all times and permission from a legal guardian is required.

All new volunteers at Mercer Botanic Gardens are interviewed by the volunteer coordinator. Upon completion of the interview and review of the volunteer handbook (posted online), volunteers are assigned to a mutually agreed upon area of service and provided with sufficient training.

Should volunteers opt to wear a name tag, Mercer will provide one. Due to insurance requirements, volunteers may not drive vehicles owned by Harris County or Mercer. A record of each volunteer's hours, services, training, emergency contact information, and enrollment form is maintained by the volunteer office and may be used for recognition awards.

Occasionally, conflicts arise that require resolution. Should a volunteer have a grievance with a staff member or fellow volunteer, every attempt should be made to handle this informally by speaking openly with that staff member or volunteer. Should further discussion be necessary, please contact the volunteer coordinator. Mercer Botanic Gardens reserves the right to terminate the services of any volunteer who is not in compliance with Harris County or Mercer policies. A Harris County policy manual is on file with the volunteer coordinator.

Mercer Volunteer expectations while on Harris County Precinct 4 (HCP4) Property at Mercer Botanic Gardens (MBG) and while working with The Mercer Society (TMS):

Privacy and confidentiality will be maintained with all volunteer's personal information:

- On contact mailing lists, on volunteer applications – both written or computer generated, or on computer databases. These records are kept in secure non-public spaces/offices.
- Volunteers & Staff will not share each other's information, such as phone numbers or emails, without their consent, this includes volunteers who are on TMS committees.
- Items left in the Volunteer Cottage, Greenhouses, Potting sheds and Visitor Center are not necessarily safe from public access as buildings are usually open throughout the day.
- Personal property should not be locked in cars in public spaces.
- Personal property should remain on/with the volunteer, as in a waist purse or backpack
- Personal property may be locked in the lockers in the volunteer cottage with your own personal lock and removed, including the lock, daily. Any locks left for an extended period of time will be removed.
- Vehicles must be parked in public access or designated volunteer access areas only, except for MBG or TMS Staff-supervised loading and unloading during special events.

Court Ordered Volunteers (COVs) perform Community Service work at HCP4 facilities on weekdays and may work alongside staff or volunteers. These people are screened before starting their community service.

Harris County Inmate trustees provide labor on a daily basis Monday – Friday, and are managed by MBG staff at all times. All requests for their help must go through the Mercer director. During special events they often provide assistance to volunteers and TMS staff. Please adhere to the guidelines that only professionally-oriented conversations take place with them. At no time should there be any personal conversations. By law, no additional food or items may be given to inmates, including cigarettes, snacks, doughnuts, drinks, books, newspapers, etc.

Safety while volunteering:

- Use only appropriate tools. Two people must assist each other while using a ladder.
- Be aware of toxic plants, insects and reptiles.
- Heat and weather extremes – stay hydrated, listen for cautions and announcements during storms.
- Immediately notify a member of HCP4 or TMS staff if you see an existing or potential hazard that needs attention.

Computer access on HCP4 and designated TMS computers:

- This includes any of the designated computers for use by TMS. There is no expectation of privacy while using HCP4 computer equipment.
- All files are property of HCP4 and/or TMS. Any usage or updates must be done in good faith to assist MBG, TMS, volunteers and staff in the operation of the park.
- Any files created for use at MBG/TMS events during volunteer time at MBG or at home should be added to the appropriate folders on HCP4 computers. You may also copy files for updating at home on a thumb drive/memory stick and download at Mercer when complete.
- All diligent care must be taken to protect the Harris County computer network from malicious data.

Mercer Botanic Gardens (MBG) & The Mercer Society (TMS) expectations of Volunteers while on Harris County Precinct 4 Property, including the north side facility:

- Volunteers are subject to a code of ethics similar to that which binds professionals in the field in which they work. All volunteers are treated equally and none will be viewed as having special privileges. All will be accountable for their actions while on county property.
- Volunteers assume certain responsibilities to perform work according to standards set by HCP4/TMS, and understand that they will be held accountable by Mercer and TMS staff.
- Volunteers should perform their work with an attitude of open-mindedness; to be receptive to training and bring only positive insight and attention.
- All property located on the premises is owned by Harris County Precinct 4. This includes, but is not limited to, all plant material, containers, tools, planting media, fertilizers.
- No volunteers are allowed on the North Side premises if the TMS grower is absent. During periods of time where the TMS grower is absent, a volunteer may be chosen to temporarily oversee the facilities while under supervision by HCP4 staff.
- All facilities and equipment are allocated by Mercer staff or the TMS grower.
- If a volunteer, for any reason, disrupts the everyday functions of Mercer or the North Side facilities, the volunteer may be asked to leave.

By agreeing to volunteer with Mercer Arboretum and Botanical Gardens and The Mercer Society, I acknowledge a commitment to my work, to those who direct it, to my fellow volunteers, and to the public.

What to do if:

- *You are unable to come to the gardens at your scheduled time:*
Notify your supervisor or the volunteer coordinator as soon as possible.
- *You have a question, comment, suggestion, or complaint concerning your department:*
Speak with your supervisor.
- *You want to recruit new volunteers:*
Speak with the volunteer coordinator to learn the current needs.
- *You wish to take a leave of absence, discontinue your work at Mercer, or change your area of placement:*
Please notify/speak with the volunteer coordinator.
- *You have a suggestion for an event, guest speaker, fund-raiser, recognition idea, etc.:*
Give your suggestions to the volunteer coordinator.
- *The weather is inclement and you work outside:*
Call your supervisor.
- *You need to use the telephone:*
Feel free to use the telephones in the Volunteer Cottage for **local calls only**.
- *There is a medical emergency in your department:*
Contact any staff member or the front desk by pushing the blue “Intercom” button and dialing “10” on any phone. If you deem the emergency to be life-threatening, call 911 first, then contact a staff member.
- *If you have any concerns about programs or events:*
Contact the volunteer coordinator or director of Mercer, by calling 281-443-8731.

TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

General Orientation:

The Orientation session during the interview will include an overview of all the aspects of Mercer.

Specialized Training:

Successful completion of specialized training programs is required to be placed in certain areas. These areas include the greenhouse and tour docents (garden and trail guides). As well as signage engraving, database entry and The Gift Shoppe volunteers. Staff supervisors provide training to volunteers in these specific areas, and each department determines the specialized training requirements.

Absences:

Unavoidable absences should be reported as soon as possible to the supervising staff member. If that staff member is not available, please leave a message with the office manager at 281-443-8731.

Recording Hours:

Hours are recorded by using the Volunteer Information Center (computer program) in the Volunteer Cottage. Volunteers choose a confidential four digit pin number that allows them to logon to the computer system and view their personal time log. All volunteers are required to record the total number of hours worked. These records are very important to both the individual and to Mercer, since the combined hours are used for grant applications and other funding requests. Each volunteer's total hours are also used for annual awards recognition events and are based on their cumulative number of volunteer hours.

Each volunteer is also expected to keep a record of the time spent on Mercer activities, whether at your home or at another location. These may be emailed to the volunteer coordinator, or designated staff.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Below are current volunteer opportunities. Review each category to see which one(s) are of interest to you.

Clerical/Administrative Office Assistance

Office Assistant

Duties:

Receive all general inquiry calls concerning hours of operation, programs, services, directions to Mercer, tour times; record and post messages for all volunteer and staff; serve as receptionist when staff receptionist is away from the desk and telephone; assist with designing and arranging displays and resources in the reception area; greet visitors; distribute mail; deliver documents to various offices; prepare mailings; assist with preparation for meetings, seminars, and conferences. Data-base entry in Access program.



Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people; ability to relate in a personable and positive manner; skills on a multiline telephone system, copier, and fax machine; good communication skills; interest in keeping abreast of information about Mercer as it expands. Data-base entry in Access program.

Training: On-the-job training

Work site: Visitors Center

Hours: Weekdays and weekends; three- to four-hour shifts

Dress: Comfortable clothing

Collections/Herbarium

Herbarium Assistant

Duties:

Collect, dry, and mount herbarium specimens; maintain records. Current and possible collections include Japanese Maples, memorial trees, crinum, gingers, palms, camellias, and more. Work may be seasonal or year-round.

Skills Needed:

Detail-oriented, knowledge of plant materials is helpful but not necessary, artistic ability.

Training: Must attend on-the-job training

Work site: Herbarium

Hours: Weekdays only, three to four hours per week

Dress: Comfortable clothing

Accession Tags and Markers

Engraver & Accession Assistant

Duties:

Label and tag memorial requests; operate engraving machine to create aluminum, brass, and plastic labels. Monitor the supplies and manage the used-sign files, place signs and attach the tags to plants.

Skills Needed:

Light typing; some computer experience beneficial. Being mechanically inclined is helpful but not necessary. Willingness to work independently once trained. Be meticulous with spelling and sign formats as all text and formats are provided.

Training: Must attend on-the-job training

Work site: Copy and engraving room in the Visitors Center

Hours: Weekdays only, four hours per week

Dress: Comfortable clothing

Education/Docent Tours

Adult Tour Docent

Duties:

Orient and welcome visitors; provide site interpretation of display gardens and grounds; provide guided interpretive tours of display gardens at regularly scheduled times; assist staff with administrative-related tasks such as paperwork, filing, and scheduling.

Skills Needed:

Interest in and willingness to learn about plants. Willingness to learn the necessary skills to lead tours and make presentations; basic people management skills; ability to work with large or small groups, or one-on-one with visitors, and interact with adults and children.

Training: Must attend specialized training (two to three sessions) regarding basic ecology and an overview of each garden area theme and related plants; in-service meetings and field trips for socialization and professional development.

Dress: Comfortable clothing (no short-shorts, please) and walking shoes; docent vest

Time Commitment: As needed on weekdays: All tours begin at 10 a.m. September through November and February through June. We ask for a one-year commitment. Scheduling is flexible.

Children's Tour Docent

Duties:

Conduct prearranged tours of the natural areas at Mercer for groups of school-aged children.

Skills Needed:

Willingness to learn and work with young children; docents must enjoy sharing the experience of discovering the environment.

Training: Must attend specialized training (two to three sessions) regarding plants and the habitats in which they are associated. Background check is required.

Dress: Comfortable clothing (no short-shorts, please) and walking shoes; docent vest

Time Commitment: As needed on weekdays: All tours begin at 10 a.m. (guides should arrive at 9:45 a.m.) September through October and March through June. We ask for a one-year commitment. Scheduling is flexible.



Finance: Development/Grants

Grant Specialist

Duties:

Research appropriate grants; coordinate applications including follow-up.

Skills Needed:

Attention to detail and good writing skills required; must have excellent organizational skills; patience, persistence, and a positive attitude.

Training: Must attend on-the-job training.

Work site: The Mercer Society office

Hours: Weekdays or weekends; four hours per week

Dress: Casual/professional attire

Supervisor: Director of Mercer

Horticulture

Garden Assistant

Duties:

Planting, weeding, pruning, watering, and mulching

Skills Needed:

Must enjoy working outdoors in all types of weather; able to bend, stoop, and do light lifting.

Training: Must attend on-the-job training.

Hours: Weekday mornings: three to four hours per week; Saturdays: three to four hours per month.

Dress: Comfortable work clothes and closed-toed shoes that can take wear and tear.

Greenhouse

Greenhouse Assistant

Duties:

Seeding flats; propagating from cuttings; transplanting; media mixing; pest monitoring; weeding; and pruning.

Skills Needed:

Have an interest in working with plants and learning propagation techniques.

Training: Must attend on-the-job training, and/or greenhouse training.

Work site: Greenhouses and potting shed.

Hours: Weekday mornings: three to four hours per week

Dress: Comfortable work clothes and closed-toed shoes able to take wear and tear.



Endangered Species and Wildscape Garden

Garden Assistant

Duties:

Weekly weeding, thinning, and mulching for this important display garden. Small jobs include maintaining the two bird feeders on a weekly basis. Also maintain the wildscape pond and bogs in the Endangered Species Garden.

Skills Needed:

An interest in working with unusual plants and other tasks

Training: Must attend on-the-job training, as this garden contains rare and endangered species.

Work site: Native plant garden area

Hours: Weekday mornings during normal Mercer hours

Dress: Comfortable work clothes and closed-toed shoes able to take wear and tear.

Cashier at Special Events

Cashier

Duties:

Receive and disburse money, process credit card transactions, and validating checks. Review tickets for accuracy and extend totals with a calculator. Coordinate with The Mercer Society (TMS) staff and other volunteers. Collect supplies needed to set up cashier stations at special events. Participate in events like the March Mart Plant Sale (March), Garden Party/Auction, Summer Color Conference, and Autumn Plant Sale & Market.

Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people; ability to relate in a personable and positive manner; experience with a credit-card machine, cash register and calculator; good communication skills.

Training: Specialized training before March Mart. On-the-job training.
Work site: Varies
Hours: Weekdays and weekends during normal Mercer hours

Ticket Writer at Plant Sales

Ticket Writer

Duties:

Ticket writers work in teams of two to organize and count plants purchased at plant sales; pull all price tags and record quantities on tickets. Participate in events like the March Mart Plant Sale (March), Garden Party/Auction, Summer Color Conference, and Autumn Plant Sale & Market. Coordinate with TMS staff and other volunteers.

Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people; ability to relate in a personable and positive manner. Good observation skills. Work well as part of a team.

Training: Specialized training before March Mart. On-the-job training.

Work site: Varies

Hours: Weekdays and weekends during normal Mercer hours

Special Event Committees

March Mart: Friday and Saturday in late March

Duties: Committees need help growing plants, researching new and unusual garden plants, visiting wholesale nurseries; data entry in Access database for the Plant Guide entries; print price tags; prepare signage.

Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people; ability to relate in a personable and positive manner. Enthusiasm for participating and running special events. Commitment is from September through March.

Training: On-the-job.

Work site: Varies

Hours: Weekdays and weekends during normal Mercer hours

Garden Party & Auction: Evening Gala

Duties: Securing table sponsors for the catered dinner; contacting vendors and collecting donated items for auction; assist with set-up and running the event.

Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people; ability to relate in a personable and positive manner; enthusiasm for participating and running special events; able to work the week before for set-up, assist with Saturday set-up, and attend Saturday event until about 11 p.m.

Training: On-the-job.

Work site: Varies

Hours: Weekdays and weekends during normal Mercer hours

Summer Color Conference: Saturday in early June

Duties: Assist with set-up and plant deliveries. Setup and prepare hospitality. Ticket writer and cashier for plant sales.

Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people with the ability to relate in a personable and positive manner; enthusiasm for participating and running special events.

Training: On-the-job.

Work site: Varies

Hours: Weekdays and weekends during normal Mercer hours

Autumn Plant Sale & Market: Saturday in late September

Duties: Assist with set-up of TMS booth, and Gift Shoppe booth at west side picnic area. Help with vendors.

Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people with the ability to relate in a personable and positive manner; enthusiasm for participating and running special events.

Training: On-the-job.

Work site: Varies

Hours: Weekdays and weekends during normal Mercer hours

Hospitality Committee

March Mart, Garden Party & Auction, Summer Color Conference, Autumn Plant Sale & Market, Sustainable Landscape Conference, and other TMS special events

Duties: Organize and assist with caterers; prepare and set up hospitality at events; purchase kitchen supplies. Shop for and pick up snacks and refreshments for various events and Gift Shoppe. Working with a budget.

Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people with the ability to relate in a personable and positive manner; enthusiasm for special events and entertaining. Cooking knowledge useful, but not required.

Training: On-the-job.

Work site: Varies

Hours: Weekdays and weekends during normal Mercer hours

Building Committee

Carpentry Work

Duties: Various carpentry projects: some are completed onsite, others are done off-site and brought to the park; new projects, repairs, maintenance, and renovations at the park.

Skills Needed:

Natural enjoyment of people with the ability to relate in a personable and positive manner; working knowledge of mechanical and electrical tools; basic carpentry, woodworking, electrical, plumbing, mending, and ingenuity a plus.

Training: On-the-job, but specialized skill required.

Work site: Varies

Hours: Weekdays and weekends during normal Mercer hours

ASSOCIATED SERVICES

Harris County Inmate Work Program

Mercer receives daily support of general labor, garden maintenance and janitorial services from inmates of the Harris County jail. All inmates are screened and selected for work assignments at this site and are under the constant supervision of specially trained staff. Participation in this program has allowed us to raise the standards of maintenance and allows Mercer personnel to spend more time in their areas of expertise. If you have any concerns or questions regarding the program, please contact the volunteer coordinator.

Horticultural Therapy and Community-Based Vocational Programs

The purpose of community-based instruction is to provide special needs students with real life, functional experiences in a natural environment during onsite vocational training. Through participation in community-based vocational training, students receive training and assessment experiences as part of their career development. The students are trained in functional academic skills and social and adaptive behavior skills, while in the community. Students work under direct supervision of the assigned school staff and an employee of Mercer.

Mercer Serves the Community

Thank you for volunteering your time and talents. Mercer recognizes the importance of volunteers in providing a quality experience to the thousands of visitors to our facility. Mercer offers gardening programs, guided tours for adult and school groups, nature programs for children, a speaker's bureau for local organizations, and special events for the general public. We hope that you will find a spot that is of interest to you and become an active Mercer volunteer.