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Stephen Cantu is a two-time Paralympian and a Master Gardener with the Master Gardeners Association of San Diego County. His inclusive gardening effort — FIG (Friendly Inclusive Gardening) — uses principles of universal design to make gardens more accessible for all age groups and abilities. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Stephen Cantu is a Master Gardener with the Master Gardener Association of San Diego County

By LISA DEADERICK

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6 AM



Making gardening more inclusive has been something Stephen Cantu has been thinking about for a while. He's always enjoyed gardening, and after injuries sustained during an accident on a job site led to his use of a wheelchair 37 years ago, he's been noticing ways to improve accessibility and inclusiveness for people with mobility issues. As a Master Gardener with the [Master Gardeners Association of San Diego County](#), he works as a volunteer (trained and supervised by the University of California Cooperative Extension) to offer home gardening and pest control

information to the public for free.

“When I was a wheelchair athlete and traveling around different sporting venues, I really kept an eye out for mobility or accessibility issues. Even when there was a major sporting event with hundreds or thousands of people with mobility issues, they didn’t always get it right,” said the former Paralympian. “So, when I noticed these issues kept popping up, I decided to look at these issues in regard to school and community gardens, and with small steps, we’re starting to see some traction for FIG.”

FIG is his Friendly Inclusive Gardening program, which teaches people how to implement the principles of universal design to make home, school and community gardens safer and more accessible to people with physical disabilities, seniors with mobility issues and young children. [His FIG workshop was originally scheduled for today](#), but has been postponed in order to comply with efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Cantu, 64, lives in Bonita with his wife, Jan Petek, and the plentiful fruit trees on their property. He took some time to talk about his FIG program, universal design, and what people can do to start a small garden at home while waiting out the coronavirus.

Q: What led you to decide to become a Master Gardener?

A: I bought this property in Bonita, and it had a number of fruit trees on it, and I got tired of hearing non-evidence-based information on how to care for fruit trees. I kept calling the Master Gardener hotline and my wife found an application for a new class starting in 2008. I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the Master Gardener program.

Q: Tell us about your Friendly Inclusive Gardening program, or FIG.

A: “Friendly” means safe and easy to move around, and the proper use of tools; “Inclusive” is for all ages and physical abilities; and “Gardening” is just that, gardening. I started thinking about FIG a few years ago, when I realized a number of people in the general public and in the Master Gardener program didn’t have an understanding about mobility issues and setting up a home, school, or community garden for an aging population. I hate to use this phrase, but “cradle-to-grave.” In other words, a garden designed for the whole family to use, from young children to grandma and grandpa. And it’s not just for a wheelchair user, either. What works for me is also much easier for everybody else.

Q: Talk a bit about universal design.

A: I started researching online so that I wouldn’t reinvent the wheel with issues dealing with accessibility and found that “universal design is the composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. ... An environment should be designed to meet the needs of all people who wish to use it.”

What I love about Bonita ...

Bonita is like a little bit of country, but close to the city. The best of both worlds.

Q: Why is this kind of garden design important to you?

A: It allows me to do the work I want to do in a safe, productive manner. It takes 7 percent more energy for me to push my wheelchair around. If I designed a garden that doesn't take into account some of the mobility issues that I deal with, I would be creating barriers and making work harder than it has to be.

Q: What are some things people should focus on when taking the step to make their gardens more inclusive?

A: One should do an analysis of their physical abilities. Keep in mind who is using the garden and their physical abilities. Start small with a kitchen herb garden, then add what you're comfortable with. One or two small tomatoes, something that's easy to deal with.

Q: Can you walk us through a couple of specific design elements and talk about what they are and how they make a garden space more inclusive for a particular set of abilities?

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A: Safety is the first thing to keep in mind. Second is path of travel: what kind of material is on the path, the distance between raised garden beds, where you park your vehicle to where you do your gardening, and access to tools and restrooms. For gardeners who have low vision or are blind, the first thing, of course, is safety.

Q: What kinds of universal design elements have you incorporated into your own garden that are specific to your needs as someone who uses a wheelchair?

A: My garden is a work in progress, it will never be done. My home garden is barely wheelchair friendly. I guess what I work on, mostly, is keeping tools clean and sharp and the garden path clear of tripping hazards. I have a two-acre lot here in Bonita, and it is all I can do to keep up with the weeding. I have 30-plus fruit trees and a small vegetable garden. What I try to do is to maintain the fruit trees so that I can easily get to the fruit and repair any watering issues in an efficient manner.

Q: With our current state of social distancing and spending the majority of time at home with our families, we're seeing a lot of panic shopping with stores running low or empty on certain foods. Do you have any recommendations for those of us who may seriously be considering finally starting that home garden? What are some of the best and easiest ways to start small as a beginner, under these current circumstances?

A: The Master Gardener public website has a ton of information on how to start a garden. The first step, of course, is to keep it simple and build on your success. Start out with a small kitchen garden of mostly herbs, something that is in small containers that you can grow next to your kitchen. Start simple and don't buy anything until you have an understanding of your needs. For a small garden, all you really need are your hands, a pair of gloves, some soil, and a few herbs. Here in Bonita, I've had very good luck with lettuce, beets, potatoes, all the usual stuff.

Q: Are there certain foods people can start growing in the next days or weeks that aren't quite as labor-intensive?

A: Yes, this is the time to start your summer gardening. [Joyce Gemmell's vegetable planting guide](#) on the Master Gardener website has recommendations for what to plant during the warm season, with tons of information. Since we're not supposed to go out in public, there are tons of options available online, but first consult with the Master Gardener website to find out what grows in San Diego.

Q: What has this work in inclusive gardening taught you about yourself?

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A: Consistent, small steps add to success. You don't have to do everything at once. In other words, patience.

Q: What is the best advice you've ever received?

A: Pay attention to detail.

Q: Please describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: Sitting in one of my boats, enjoying the sunset.

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