



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/master-gardener-decorates-white-house>

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Johnson County Master Gardener ‘honored’ to help decorate White House for Christmas

Clay says three-day experience was culmination of a 16-year-old dream

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

LENEXA, Kan. – In 2008, sitting in her living room watching a popular garden show on television, Wendy Clay spawned a dream.

One day, Clay thought, she, too, would like to help decorate the White House for Christmas.

It wasn't so far-fetched. After all, Clay – who currently lives in De Soto, Kansas – was an active member of the Johnson County Extension Master Gardeners, a group in which she had developed various leadership skills.

Clay's dream became reality when she was one of 300 volunteers invited to Washington, D.C. this year to decorate the iconic home that has housed every U.S. President except George Washington. Her selection among thousands of applications took her to the nation's capital for three days after Thanksgiving to lend a hand in creating the 2024 White House Holiday Theme, 'A Season of Peace and Light.'

"It was very emotional for me," said Clay, who has owned a small business named Clay Pots since 2003. "I felt a great responsibility to represent my Master Gardener group, my church, my community, state and the American people. The experience has been my 16-year-old dream."

Most of the design decisions for the White House display are made by large-scale event planning companies and professional designers before volunteers arrive. Clay and the other volunteers were charged with following those design plans. She was assigned to the Grand Foyer – or main entrance – of the White House on a team of about two dozen volunteers.

"There were six tall trees in the foyer to decorate White house style – meaning, over-the-top, loaded with ornaments -- and hundreds of different-sized faux presents to wrap and place under the trees," Clay said. "But our biggest responsibility was assembling more than 1,000 white paper doves that hung the entire length of the central hallway."

The doves, she said, are about 10 inches in length and made of heavy paper. She was among the group that prepared the doves, while others hung them from a ceiling grid with fishing line.

“It was a three-day process to get all of those doves assembled and hung,” Clay said. “The slightest breeze causes the doves to flutter. It is just beautiful.”

Counting the area that Clay helped with, this year’s White House Holiday decorations include 83 Christmas trees; 9,810 feet of ribbon; 28,125 ornaments; 165,075 holiday lights; and a Gingerbread White House made of 25 sheets of gingerbread dough, 10 sheets of sugar cookie dough, 65 pounds of pastillage (a type of icing made of sugar), 45 pounds of chocolate, 50 pounds of royal icing and 10 pounds of gum paste.

First Lady Jill Biden spoke to the volunteers once the decorations were complete: “The holidays have always held a special place in our hearts and we’ve loved opening the doors of the People’s House wider and wider each year, continuing the spirit of goodwill and gratitude. America’s story is your story, and we hope you feel at home here.”

Clay has been a member of the Johnson County Extension Master Gardeners since 2001, and had applied three times to be a member of the decorating team. Former Johnson County horticulture agent Dennis Patton, a pillar in Kansas City-area gardening circles who passed away earlier this year, helped to edit the letter she wrote as part of her nomination.

She was co-chair of the decorating committee for the 2023 International Master Gardeners conference, held in Overland Park, which included creating 120 table centerpieces for the ballroom, arranging fresh floral arrangements for 10 bathrooms, and decorating the speaker’s stage and podium.

Clay, who also co-chaired a decorating committee for the Hosta Convention in Lenexa, said her involvement in Extension Master Gardeners has improved her creativity, flexibility, time management, leadership, communication and ability to “work with men and women from many different backgrounds” – skills she said helped her as a member of the White House decorating team.

“When I arrived to help decorate the White House, I was very nervous, but so excited,” Clay said. “To walk in the hallowed White House halls, where many of the important decisions made for the good of the world took place, and where kings and queens and Lady Diana have dined...it’s an overwhelming feeling.”

“Just think,” she added, “a small town girl who grew up on Countryside Lane in Lawrence, Kansas was roaming the White House halls on Pennsylvania Avenue.”

More information about the [Johnson County Extension Master Gardener’s program](#) is available online, or call [K-State Research and Extension’s office in Johnson County](#) at 913-715-7000.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Johnson County Extension Master Gardeners, <https://www.johnson.k-state.edu/programs/lawn-garden/extension-master-gardeners/>

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