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Deb Hoffmann, master gardener, explained how gourds can be dried, painted and made into decorative or useful items.

Master gardener has grown to love fall

By **JODIE TWEED**

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BAXTER — Fall is Deb Hoffmann's favorite time of year, which may seem a little odd since the Baxter woman is a master gardener and now most of her beloved plants and flowers are dying.

But there is beauty in fall, too, and Hoffmann spent Saturday afternoon driving around the Brainerd lakes area taking photographs of the changing leaves with her new camera.

"You get a whole new garden because everything takes on a golden look," Hoffmann said. "I love the feel of fall. I love the colors. I love the cooler weather. Me and humidity — we don't get along."

Hoffmann and her husband, Louie, became master gardeners three years ago, a Christmas present to themselves. As one of their master gardener projects this year they spearheaded the project to renovate the horticulture building at the Crow Wing County Fairgrounds.

The couple work well together in their beautiful gardens in their backyard because they enjoy different aspects of gardening. She enjoys growing gourds, pumpkins, corn and flowers while her husband enjoys growing vegetables like broccoli, green peppers, potatoes and tomatoes. She likes decorating while he enjoys lawn work.

Deb Hoffmann

Age: 57. She celebrated her birthday on Friday.

Residence: She lives in Baxter with Louie, her husband of 35 years. They have three grown children and two grandchildren.

Occupation: She has worked at JoAnn Fabrics in Baxter for 20 years.

Interests: She enjoys gardening and became a master gardener three years ago, along with her husband. She's particularly fond of growing and painting gourds. She also enjoys quilting, decorating, painting, photography and reading.

Volunteer work: In addition to community volunteer work as a master gardener, Hoffman spends her Tuesdays volunteering through her church, St. Francis Catholic Church, at St. Joseph's Medical Center, providing communion for those who wish for it while hospitalized.

Worst gourd disaster: The first time she grew gourds 10 years ago she thought they had gone bad so she threw them all out. Later she realized that was the way they were supposed to look and she had destroyed 10 perfect gourds.

Favorite season: Fall. She enjoys the cooler weather and the changing colors of the leaves. "Everything is dying in the garden but that's OK," said Hoffman. "That's what it's supposed to do."

Most difficult plant for her to grow: Butterfly weed. She grew some from seed and gave some of the seeds to her mother in Little Falls and while her mom's plants are growing beautifully, Hoffman said her plants won't grow in her garden. "It struggles," Hoffman said. "This little thing just suffers."

Together, they make a good team, she said. Often after puttering around the garden in different areas, they'll take a break and sit together, side by side, in their Adirondack chairs, admiring their hard work.

"Life is good when you're out in

the garden," Hoffmann said with a smile. "If you're crabby, you want to work in the garden. If you're happy, you want to work in the garden."

Hoffmann grew up in Little Falls and is a 1969 Little Falls High School graduate, as is her

husband. She worked for three years as a commercial artist for Jostens before she and her husband married and moved to the Brainerd area in 1976. Her husband manages the SuperAmerica store on South Sixth Street while she has worked for the past 20 years at JoAnn Fabrics.

While Hoffmann enjoys many aspects of gardening, her favorite is growing gourds and painting them. She started growing gourds 10 years ago and, through trial and error, has learned a lot about the process. It takes six months to one year to fully dry out a gourd so it may be painted. She has grown varieties of gourds and her favorites are apple gourds, which she paints to look just like large apples. She also makes birdhouses out of gourds. She tried her hand at growing dipper gourds this summer but with the cool and wet weather this spring, the growing season was shorter than usual and she's unsure if she'll be able to harvest them.

Hoffmann enjoys decorating her home with her gourds and has given them as gifts. She has no interest in selling them.

"They just make me happy," Hoffmann said of painting gourds. "If I sold them then it would become a job and it wouldn't be fun."

Hoffmann said the key is having patience as your gourds take up to a year to dry, turning them every so often. She harvests her

gourds in the fall then has to wait until the following summer to paint them. Right now she's got a couple of apple gourds that are shaped like pumpkins so that's how she'll paint them. She's painted gourds that look like ghosts and other creatures, but she mostly likes to paint them in neutral shades of brown with the natural grain showing through.

Hoffmann said most people don't realize that gourds have to dry out and look bad before they can be smoothed and painted. Her first year of growing gourds 10 years ago she threw out all 10 of her perfectly good gourds because she didn't realize they were supposed to look that way.

"People don't understand that they have to look this bad to look this cute," Hoffmann said, holding both a drying gourd and a gourd she had painted.

The Hoffmanns also grow grapes and make their own wine.

As the fall comes to an end and winter approaches, Hoffmann will switch gears and return to her love of quilting and reading.

"It's almost like a nesting thing because in your mind you get that cozy feeling," she said, of winter.

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