

In the mid-1980s, during a particularly rainy period of the Oklahoma climate cycle, recently hired Tulsa County OSU Extension Office horticulturist Sue Gray set out to meet a pecan farmer near the Caney River. "I drove up the little county road, through his orchard, and I had to stop because the rest of the orchard was flooded," Gray said. "There was water over the road ahead of me, and his house was on up the hill beyond that. "So I pulled the car to a stop, and here comes a man in this Jon boat - a Jon boat is a flat-bottom boat - he comes rowing up, and he had on high-top rubber boots. And he got out of the boat, and he said, 'Susan, just park your car right there. I want you to look at my orchard, but we're going to float through.' " Gray said as she got on the boat and paddled through during that first year on the job, she remembers thinking about her career, "Well, this is just going to be great." "And it was," she said. Gray, 54, is retiring at the end of the year. Her job at the extension office involves serving commercial growers and home gardeners in the areas of fruit, vegetable and pecan production. Gray said she had always been interested in plants. School friends remember her tending to her tomato plants while they played with their Barbies, she said. When she discovered the field of horticulture while flipping through a career card file at her high school library in Oklahoma City, she decided that was the career for her. Gray graduated from OSU in 1979 with a bachelor's degree in horticulture, then received her master's degree from the University of Maryland in 1981. In 1984, after waiting patiently for the horticulture position she had her eye on, Gray was hired as the Tulsa County OSU Extension horticulturist, where she's been ever since. Gray has always thought of herself as a public servant. "I serve the citizens of Tulsa County," she said. "I'm available to them every day of the week." Gray has helped farmers secure grants, walked new growers through the

ins and outs of farming and empathized with those whose crops suffered due to Oklahoma's often severe weather. For several years, Gray also served as a co-host for Oklahoma Gardening, a gardening television program, and wrote a gardening column for the Tulsa World. But the most rewarding part of her job was watching the progress of the people she helped. "To watch them grow into success is very rewarding," she said. Gray said she also formed long-term relationships with the people she met on the job. Anna Katherine Harris has known Gray for several years. Harris met Gray when she decided to get involved with the Cherry Street Farmers' Market. "She's very accommodating," Harris said of Gray. "She will come out to look at your property. If you need help deciding what you want to grow, she's right there ... She's a walking encyclopedia." Paul Hudson, who met Gray in the mid-1980s when he decided to begin growing pecans on his farm in Leonard, said Gray always had the right answers for him. "I don't know what I woulda done without her," he said. "She's one of the kindest persons I ever met. She'll bend over backwards to help you." Gray's colleagues are sad to see her go. Bruce Peverley, an agriculture extension educator, has worked with Gray for nearly 20 years. "Her personality and enthusiasm are one of the reasons that make you want to come to work every day," he said. Peverley also describes Gray as a "well" of information. "She's very, very intelligent," he said. But Charlotte Richert, Tulsa County OSU Extension director, said Gray's intelligence came with great humility. Richert describes Gray as having a "service-oriented spirit." "She is truly remarkable while being humble," she said. Gray said she hopes to have more time to tend to her own garden once she retires, as well as time to spend with her husband, who recently retired. "We're one of those couples that actually like each other," she joked.

Open house What: Tulsa County OSU Extension Office open house. Meet OSU Extension office staff and learn about their work. Where: 4116 E. 15th St. When: Tuesday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nour

