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Defining the Business of UGA & Master Gardeners

The current volunteerism climate begs definition of who we are, what we do, and for whom we work. From every angle of the Master Gardener program, we must be confident of our work and our connection to UGA. Master Gardeners are volunteers recruited and trained by Cooperative Extension to assist in the work done locally. So, what is the work done locally? How does that relate back to the University’s mission and vision? Our history lends clarity to these questions.

The Land-Grant University

University of Georgia is a land-grant university. Land-grant universities were created by federal law in 1862 for the purpose of teaching “agriculture and the mechanic arts…to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life.” In the late 1800s, experimental farms, or stations, became the place to get the latest and greatest information on growing crops. The Hatch Act (1887) defined their purpose as a place for scientific investigation of agriculture. Faculty published bulletins and project reports to the public.

Cooperative Extension

Cooperative Extension itself was defined by the Smith-Lever Act (1914) to target a population of those “persons not attending or resident in said colleges” and to use teaching tools that included “giving of instruction and practical demonstrations” using “field demonstration, publications, and otherwise.” Intrinsic to all versions of mission statements for Cooperative Extension is the idea of helping people, improving the quality of life, and extending the resources of the university. Cooperative Extension is charged with being the connection between the land-grant university and the people of the state. The connection manifests itself in the educational program plan on which the local agent is working. Educational programs should be firmly rooted in community needs and aligned with research priorities at the university level.

Volunteers in Extension

Volunteers are an essential part of Cooperative Extension and our educational program delivery. In some cases, like 4-H, adult volunteers are a required part of the actual program, such as a 4-H club sponsor. Without the volunteer sponsor, the club could not exist. In other cases, Extension relies on volunteers to provide input for program planning. Local Extension advisory committees help identify
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local needs and extend them to Extension programs and University research. In yet other scenarios, volunteers are critical for programs. As populations expand and Extension budgets contract, the ratio of paid employees to clients increases dramatically and volunteers are recruited and trained to help Extension agents deliver educational programs to their clients.

The Master Gardener program was developed in 1972, as an Extension Agent’s answer to the overwhelming volume of often-repetitive gardening questions from the public. He believed well-trained volunteers could respond to many of the everyday homeowner questions, freeing him and his colleagues for more technical and difficult problems and proactive education. The Extension Agent selected, trained, and certified volunteers as Master Gardeners. They succeeded in meeting his objectives. Forty years later, similar programs exist in all 50 states, Canada and around the world.

In Georgia, Extension Master Gardener Volunteers assist Cooperative Extension by providing unbiased horticultural information through educational gardening projects that apply the research and resources of the University of Georgia. For example, they assist with landscape and water conservation education, teach people how to grow vegetables for home consumption, and improve quality of life for several community sectors, including elderly and disabled. Demonstration gardens augment the work conducted at the University and at experiment stations, following the historic approach of teaching by example in the hundreds of communities throughout the state. These activities follow the general mission of Extension and are conducted by volunteers who work on behalf of the University.

How does this relate to the business of the University of Georgia?

In addition to meeting the expectations of a land grant university, the University of Georgia has a commitment to conducting research to create and apply new knowledge, and a commitment to public service and continuing education to meet the needs of Georgia’s citizens. Master Gardeners are a grassroots extension of the University, using horticultural research findings to solve problems, strengthen communities, and offer life-long learning to Georgia citizens. Master Gardeners, when implementing components of the Extension educational program for the public, extend and translate the research generated at the University level to local communities, aiding in the problem-solving and life-betterment that results from applying research results. Master Gardeners increase the outreach of the University in our communities and further UGA’s commitments to the state of Georgia.


According to a CSREES 2009 Nationwide Survey*

- Total current Extension Master Gardener volunteers: 94,865
- Total annual volunteer hours: 5,197,573
- Value of volunteer hours: $101.4 Million

Hort Resources

Gardening and Your Health publication series –

Growing a Master Gardener: MGs as Community and Organizational Leaders

Sheri Dorn, State Coordinator, Georgia Master Gardener Extension Volunteer Program

Agents ask for leaders to run projects, MGs look for leaders to organize the plant sale, and it seems like everyone’s looking for a leader. Leadership—what image does that word bring to mind for a Master Gardener? Is it so scary that you hide in the kudzu? Indeed, it shouldn’t be! Is it something distinctive that you are born with, like a fine picotee edge on a delicate flower? No, leadership can be learned, just like the fine art of pruning or growing beautiful roses (Knock Outs level the playing field, don’t they?). Is it rigid and militaristic, like that square hedge on your neighbor’s side? Is leadership as prickly as Chinese holly?

No, leadership is not any of these things, nor is it a terrible, no-good, very-bad thing. Leadership is like the beauty of a well-landscaped garden. It takes time to develop, mistakes learned from can improve it, it takes good soil and strong roots (though both can be made), and when it is good, everyone feels contented and peaceful.

In fact, really good leadership shares five practices†:

- **Model the Way.** Do you set a good example? Is your horticultural house in order? Are you showing the community around you what sustainable garden practices look like? Similarly, do you attend MG planning meetings regularly? Do you contribute to the process? Do you step up to the plate, even if for small tasks?

- **Inspire a Vision.** Do you have a passion for your community? Do you see how horticulture can make your community a better place to live? Does your passion for that vision nudge others into action? Do you see potential in your fellow MGs? Can you encourage others to model the way?

- **Challenge the Process.** Okay, within reason, please! Kouzes and Posner (2008) tell us that “innovation comes more from listening than from telling.” Are you listening? What is your community asking for? Do you recognize good ideas and try them, challenge your neighbors and others in your community to try something different? Don’t forget to learn from your experiences along the way. Remember, we are like the garden. Sometimes we are more improved by learning from what doesn’t work.

- **Enable Others to Act.** Are you fostering collaboration? Building trust? Are you giving others a chance to bloom or are you shading them or crowding them out?

- **Encourage the Heart.** Remember that we are a volunteer corps. When one hurts, we all hurt. Sometimes we are the light for another. Appreciate and celebrate each other. Remember that deep roots sustain you in times of drought.

MGs by nature are leaders because you are willing to come together with a common passion, pledge your time and resources, and join hands with fellow gardeners to nurture our local communities. That is, after all, what we do.†


Choosing a Teaching Method

Are you planning a new gardening project or activity—a workshop, a lecture, a demonstration garden or a tour? What has prompted you to choose that particular approach to teaching others about gardening? (Do not be alarmed—if you do not know the answer to these questions, we’ll revisit them in coming issues of The Volunteer Vine.) Many times, we have already determined (or assumed) several other pieces of the education puzzle by the time we get to the point of choosing a teaching method. We assume that we know what the problem is and who has the problem (our audience). Armed with this information, we begin planning our educational projects.

Master Gardeners are often instrumental in launching a project based on the interests and skills of the group rather than the needs of the community or audience, essentially Extension’s student(s). Sometimes it is a successful match, but we may be able to improve our results by reconsidering our approach. Our technique—the way in which we as Extension educators establish a relationship with the learner and the learning task—can influence the outcome. Ultimately, we want all the gardeners of the world to do what we do, right? But, after the audience participates in our project, will they be able to garden like us? Let’s look at a few teaching techniques.
Teaching Method continued...

INFORMATION-GIVING TECHNIQUES. This approach fits the situation where an increase in awareness is needed. Do you just need to get the information out? The Emerald Ash Borer is an example of a need to get the word out. People need to look for the insect, and know what they are looking for. Brochures, pictures, colorful monitoring traps, and temporary tattoos for youth certainly build awareness that something is going on and learners need to be aware. We may include lectures, question-and-answer sessions, panel presentations, and debates in this passive learning category.

SKILL-ACQUIRING TECHNIQUES. Do you need to change behaviors? Do you need to help people practice new actions? These techniques inspire active learning – the learner is involved in the teaching/learning process. Proper pruning skills, for example, are often taught through a hands-on activity. It requires experience studying the plant and deciding where and when to cut. Hands-on workshops, active demonstrations, role-playing, case studies, and simulations that model the action as well as involve participants in the behavior all help the learner acquire new skills.

KNOWLEDGE-APPLYING TECHNIQUES. This approach involves a scenario where the learner can apply what has been learned. For example, homeowners involved in a neighborhood turf management program must apply what they have learned in order to be a part of the discussions and activities of the program.

So how do we know what technique is best to use? Should we use a combination of these techniques? These answers come from knowing the audience, the problem, and what we need to achieve. We will visit those topics in the next The Volunteer Vine. Stay tuned!

New Coordinator "Transplanted" To Griffin

On June 18, 2012, a Virginia license plate was spotted in the parking lot in front of the Cowart Building on the UGA-Griffin Campus. Bob Westerfield, then Interim Coordinator for the Georgia Master Gardener Extension Volunteer Program, was quite relieved. Sheri Dorn, the new coordinator, had arrived on campus, "transplanted" from Virginia, ready to lead the Georgia MGEV program to new accomplishments.

Sheri is a Virginia native, born and raised in Newport News. She attended Virginia Tech for her undergraduate and graduate programs, studying under the guidance of Dr. Diane Relf, Emeritus Professor and Extension Specialist for Consumer Horticulture. Sheri believes that environmentally sound gardens enhance and improve the life quality of the entire community and that the key to any successful garden or landscape is choosing the right plant for the right place.

As a manager, Sheri has several philosophies. First, remain sensitive to the needs and philosophies of others. She believes in soliciting participation from staff, volunteers, and superiors to develop solutions that move an organization forward. Additionally, continual education and learning helps keep employees and volunteers engaged, ultimately increasing job satisfaction and performance. Ultimately, Sheri believes that a manager should be creative and resourceful, always thinking "outside the pot."

Having served as the State Coordinator for the Virginia Master Gardener program as well as an Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent, Sheri has the perspective to "grow" the Georgia Master Gardener program. She also has the horticultural background, having owned a small-scale retail nursery and landscape contracting firm with her husband, Darrell. (She also believes in getting children "dirty" while they are young, so you will often find her twins, Heath and Heather, in the garden with her.) Sheri’s Extension Horticulture responsibilities include consumer ornamentals. Look for a lot of materials hammering away at that "right plant, right place" philosophy and the connection between people and plants. She pledges to be a resource for Agents as well as volunteers, offering both volunteer program management resources and guidance as well as horticultural expertise.

The University of Georgia is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.