The “Why” of MGEV Efforts

This issue of The Volunteer Vine focuses attention on “why”. Why does Extension recruit MGEVs? Why are MGEVs important to the work of Extension? Why should we choose one project over another? Why should we concentrate our energies in one direction or the other?

Extension recruits MGEVs to increase outreach to Georgia communities. MGEVs have a passion for plants and people that inspires and energizes Extension programming. MGEVs also have many connections to the community that, when multiplied by the number of MGEVs, greatly expand Extension’s spheres of influence.

When project choices and programming decisions are made, MGEVs can influence the direction of Extension’s educational outreach. MGEVs have the vision to see outcomes that non-plant people do not see. MGEVs get excited about making a difference in their communities, knowing that plants and landscapes make our communities better places to live, work, and raise families. This passion and energy can carry Extension right on into the heart of projects or programs that are great, but that may not be the best choice for the situation, or that may over commit Extension or MGEVs.

So, why should we choose one project over another? Extension, like any business or operation, needs focus. Educational programming needs to be efficient, well thought out, and specific. To maintain the volunteer “happiness” factor, over-commitment and burnout must be avoided. By knowing what is relevant to and needed by the local community, a focused educational outreach agenda can provide the framework for project selection.

This process of choosing a relevant focus is known in other arenas as “needs analysis,” “market research,” or “market analysis.” It is like taking a snapshot of the current situation, determining what exists already and what is missing. In Extension, needs assessments are used to determine the most important issues and problems faced by our public and educational program are built around these issues and problems.

MGEVs are delivering unbiased, research-based information about horticulture and gardening to Georgia communities. MGEV work is divided into five main areas that are referred to as the state program initiatives (see sidebar). Not every initiative is relevant or important in every community and not every community has the resources to carry out programming in each of those areas. However, these initiatives provide a framework to prioritize Extension and MGEV work so that it meets community needs while at the same time not exceeding the resources of Extension and MGEVs.
The “Why” of MGEV Efforts continued...

Thus, identifying and assessing communities’ needs are the first steps toward arriving at a clear organizational mission. This process is not a one-time occurrence that happens only at the outset; rather, it is an ongoing process that keeps Extension relevant to the local community. It will be necessary to again assess the current situation (evaluation), redefine the problem, and decide what is the most effective way of addressing it.

Keeping Extension programs relevant and in tune with the needs of community is valuable to stakeholders. Meeting the needs of the community through public resources satisfies stakeholders while also meeting the mission of Cooperative Extension. Knowing which areas of horticulture to focus on even brings focus to MGEV Advanced Training – MGEVs know what types of training they need to better deliver programs in their communities. Relevant programming is win-win.

Needs assessments can be carried out several ways. Sometimes they are very simple, based on observations or existing data, such as the census. Sometimes, surveys are used to gather information about attitudes, preferences, or level of knowledge about the topic or issue. Other methods of assessing needs can include community meetings or public focus groups that give community members opportunity to voice their opinions or concerns about a topic or issue.

While needs assessment falls largely to Extension faculty (explained in the next article), MGEVs can be helpful in the process. Because they tend to be highly connected to the community (i.e., church involvement, neighborhood associations, community groups), MGEVs are familiar with many issues and needs within a community. These same community connections can also become resources in carrying out Extension’s educational agenda.

Needs assessment is used to keep Extension programming relevant to the community. MGEVs can play a role in Extension’s needs assessment efforts. Once the needs and existing level of knowledge about a topic is determined, then further work, such as setting goals and planning a series of events to achieve the goals, can proceed.

**Extension Leadership System (ELS)**

**What Is ELS?**

The Extension Leadership System (ELS) in Georgia is a statewide network of county-based volunteers working to support, and advocate for, Extension programming at all levels. All County Extension Agents assemble and work with a Program Development Team (PDT) designed to support the work they do in their respective Extension program area (4-H Youth Development, Family and Consumer Sciences, and/or Agriculture and Natural Resources). In addition to the PDT’s, an overall county council serves to coordinate efforts for advocacy and support of the total county Cooperative Extension program.

**Philosophy and Purpose**

Social, economic, and environmental forces are constantly in motion and challenging communities to respond in order to maintain a quality of life that a community’s citizens have come to expect. The Extension Leadership System is designed to help focus the resources of the University of Georgia on a county’s most critical needs and opportunities. PDT’s provide guidance, assistance, and leadership for the designated program area.

Cooperative Extension’s educational programs are based on the needs identified in communities and emerging issues of the surrounding area. It is the purpose of the PDT to make sure these local, regional, and national needs are reflected in programs, and that educational resources to address the needs are identified and mobilized. More specifically, the purposes of the Program Development Team are to:

- Determine general program direction and goals
- Review current program efforts and evaluate their progress and effectiveness
- Provide leadership and counsel in development of countywide programs
- Advise program development by establishing priorities based on countywide needs
- Encourage, coordinate, and recognize Extension volunteer efforts
- Coordinate and/or support the efforts of the working groups and/or issue teams
- Link Extension programs with other groups and agencies
- Identify and target Extension programs for historically under-represented populations
- Communicate the Extension program to the community
Extension Leadership System continued

How Does It Work?
Cooperative Extension professionals set goals for their program areas at the local level and select PDT and County Council members with the skills to help achieve those goals. Each team/council is comprised of stakeholders who are involved in the community and committed to improving the quality of life for the people who live there. Program Development Teams help identify key needs and opportunities in the county, set priorities for UGA Cooperative Extension programs to address those issues, conduct those programs and evaluate their effectiveness. Teams/councils meet a minimum of 3-5 times per year, and each meeting features a review of accomplishments and goals, an educational session, planning for future programming including team member involvement. Members are asked to serve a three-year term of service.

What Does Success Look Like?
For numerous examples of how ELS has positively impacted Extension programming across Georgia, please visit the ‘Success Stories’ section of our Website at: http://www.caes.uga.edu/intranet/coextopr/progdevelop/ELSsuccess.html

County MG Program Spotlight: DeKalb
This spring, DeKalb County begins its 34th year of training Master Gardeners. Master Gardener Extension Volunteers have been a part of DeKalb County’s Cooperative Extension urban horticulture outreach since the fall of 1979, when the first class was trained. With 280 active Master Gardeners, and more than 20 project sites to keep volunteers busy, it’s no wonder that they were able to achieve over 16,000 hours of volunteer service and reach out to over 25,000 Extension clients last year.

Back in 1979, the initial intent of the Master Gardener program was to train volunteers to help answer phone calls related to home gardening and landscaping. Thirty-four years later, DeKalb MGEVs are still answering the calls, staffing the hotline all day, every day during business hours, with a half-day schedule during the slower winter months. Gary Peiffer, County Extension Agent in DeKalb has been with the program since its beginning. He says that phone calls are less frequent now, as Extension clients turn to e-mail to ask questions, but he has Master Gardeners assigned to help with that, too.

While about 40-60 volunteers work at the Extension office in DeKalb County, many more MGEVs work at project sites where DeKalb Extension partners with government facilities and nonprofits to maintain demonstration landscapes and gardens. These project sites are situated in neighborhoods and communities all over the county. Many of the Master Gardeners enjoy being able to work on projects near their homes, for the benefit of their communities and for the reduced need for driving in city traffic.

The project sites are varied, from native plant gardens in public greenspaces to a new fruit orchard in a community garden. There are compost and recycling demonstrations, an AAS Rose Trial site, historic gardens, and a new bog garden at a community park. All twenty of the sites are team projects headed up by two Master Gardener project leaders, working with a mix of veterans and trainees, along with the partner organizations that help provide labor and funding.

MGEV project leader training is done twice a year to help the leaders with ideas for training new volunteers, marketing, event planning, and project improvement. Each team is encouraged to label the site plants, develop educational literature, and plan educational events to get the community engaged and learning in the garden. In addition to the dedication and hard work of the volunteers, Peiffer says the success of the MGEV program in DeKalb is due to the efforts of Program Coordinator Sarah Brodd and CEA Lynwood Blackmon.

It’s not all garden work, though. DeKalb County has an advisory board that helps keep the program growing. They assist with selection of new MGEVs and conduct an orientation where the new volunteers can learn about the projects they can be involved in. The advisory board plans events for the group, like the annual holiday dinner, volunteer recognition events, and the quarterly meetings that serve as both social and educational opportunities for Master Gardeners.
Upcoming Training Opportunities

Sustainable and Smart: Master Gardener Advanced Training Series

March 5, 2013: Leadership: Building a Dynamic MGEV Network (R) Gwinnett County. This six-hour training is designed to equip Master Gardener Extension Volunteers with skills and knowledge to build and manage effective groups. Effective groups work when participants understand others, have excellent communication skills and successfully manage conflict. Registration is now open; contact your Extension Agent for a registration form.

March 22, 2013: Sustainability in the Garden: Comparing Conventional and Organic Garden Management (SGL), Athens, GA (prior to GMGA spring conference); This six-hour training is designed to give Master Gardener Extension Volunteers in-depth training in the differences between conventional and organic garden management. During the session management techniques and products will be examined and pros and cons will be weighed. Registration is now open; contact your Extension Agent for a registration form.

April 29-May 4, 2013: Cultivated Spaces (YCG) as part of our bus trip to St. Louis, MO titled “Cultivated Spaces Tour: The Gardens of St. Louis.” Registration is now open; email masterg@uga.edu for information

June 7-8, 2013: Master Gardener University 2013 (2 tracks: YCG or SGL & DT) The Georgia Center, Athens, GA (Registration opens March 1) 🎁

Master Gardener University is looking for sponsors!

Help keep registration prices affordable for MGEVs attending the first Master Gardener University by asking your local MGEV association to sponsor the following:

- Keynote Speaker Sponsor ($1000)
- Lunch Sponsor ($500)
- Break Sponsor ($250)
- Speaker Appreciation Sponsor ($100)

Each sponsoring association will receive listing on conference program materials and table tents posted during the sponsored event. The Association sponsoring the Keynote Speaker will receive places at the Dignitary Table during Friday night’s special dinner during Master Gardener University.

We are also looking for a team of MGEVs to prepare “bags of goodies” for Master Gardener University registrants. Are you interested in coordinating the donations of garden-related items for paid registrants of MGU? This team would solicit donations, prepare bags, and deliver them to the Georgia Center by 10 am on June 6, 2013. This team will also receive listing on conference materials and special recognition during MGU.

We are looking for MODERATORS for MGU sessions! Are you willing to lend a hand to speakers or presenters during your session? We need approximately 25 people who are willing to fetch/turn down lights/distribute handouts/set-up/clean-up, etc. during a morning or afternoon class block. In return, you will receive a complimentary registration for a future Advanced Training offered by the State Program Office in Griffin. Contact us at the State Program Office at 770-228-7243.

Hort Resources:

Websites UGA School Garden Resources University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences’ school garden initiative provides a range of resources for anyone interested in school gardens.
http://extension.uga.edu/k12/school-gardens/


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