



Motivational Mentors for the Florida Master Gardener Program

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The Manatee County Master Gardener Program started a Master Gardener Mentoring Program in 1997. As agents retired, so did the mentoring program. By 2009, attrition had a strong impact on the number of volunteers. The Manatee County Extension Office has a Plant Diagnostic Clinic, in which the Master Gardener volunteers help address homeowner questions about their landscapes. Prior to 2010, the clinic was open weekdays. Due to the low volume of volunteers, in 2010 the clinic had to close one weekday. Going from over 150 Master Gardener volunteers in 2005 to 56 by 2009, it was time to revitalize the mentoring program. Motivational Master Gardener mentors start with the right individuals who are passionate about volunteerism and gardening, who know proper horticultural practices, and who love to share their passion and knowledge with others. Motivational mentors listen with both ears and continually communicate with their assigned trainee and the horticulture extension agent. In 2014, the mentoring program was reactivated and revised in an attempt to increase the number of trainees completing the training program and one-year internship.

The Master Gardener Mentoring Program's main objective is to train veteran Master Gardeners to mentor new volunteer trainees. Through the training, the veteran Master Gardener would be equipped with knowledge on mentoring, a list of program expectations, and a checklist of training dates. The Mentoring Program had additional objectives. Mentors welcome and motivate new volunteers trainees for the Manatee County Master Gardener training program. Mentors encourage the trainees to become involved in activities in the classroom, the Plant Diagnostic Clinic, and the demonstration gardens. They guide trainees through weekly subject areas, homework assignments and quizzes, to include reviewing 100 plants for the plant identification exam. Lastly, mentors review training progress and provide support to the trainees if training becomes overwhelming.

Materials and Methods

In 2013–14, a toolkit was developed to help revitalize the mentoring program. It includes a job description with duties of the mentor; a list of expectations for a successful mentor/mentee relationship; a checklist with week-by-week tasks and dates correlating to the training schedule, and scheduled trainings sessions and materials to mold a veteran Master Gardener into a motivational mentor. Two training sessions for the mentors were held three months prior to new Master Gardener Training Program. Fact sheets were developed with the job description, duties, expectations, and a training timeline.

Results and Discussion

From 2009–14, the number of volunteers increased to 95 individuals, a 59% increase in the number of volunteers. The mentors provided positive comments about the value of the training and the program list of expectations to the Urban Horticulture Extension Agent during the training evaluation. They said the guidelines helped them keep in touch with their trainees.

All (100%) of the trainees for the first time in six years completed the training program. Eighty-seven percent ($n = 16$) of the trainees went on to complete their one-year internship and were certified as Florida Master Gardeners in Summer 2014. Only two individuals did not complete the internship. Trainees told the Extension Agent they benefitted by the mentorship. One comment was "I felt my stress level for day one in the Plant Diagnostic Clinic was less because my mentor was there with me." The two trainees who did not complete their internship reported their mentor contacted them once during the training period instead of weekly. Both individuals told the Extension Agent they felt their low exam score and lack of interest in the Plant Diagnostic Clinic was due to lack of support from their mentor.

An increase in trainees and volunteers resulted after the revamping of the mentoring program. The mentoring program will be repeated in 2015. To prevent ineffective mentoring, this year the trainees will evaluate their mentors weekly. The mentor program has been designed to help an Extension Agent from any discipline in any county develop a successful volunteer program.

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