



## Growing Plants and Volunteers: A Master Gardener Nursery Project

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The first few Master Gardener classes, during the years 1995 – 2000, graduated a motivated core of individuals. With the size of Okaloosa County, it was necessary to open a satellite office, which was quickly staffed by volunteers. During the “slower” days, Master Gardeners worked on “plant projects.” The office had enough space to establish a nursery. With assistance from county personnel and donations from Master Gardeners, the space grew to a 1500 sq. ft. productive learning facility with a greenhouse, work area, tables and hoop houses. The Commercial Horticulture agent served as a trainer and consultant. Volunteers were educated on nursery Best Management Practices, propagation and scouting. Production focused on “Florida-Friendly” plants that were utilized in local planting projects and sold for fund raising. The site also offered the opportunity for public education. Established in 2001, the Master Gardener Nursery Project has been able to raise 2500–13,000 plants annually. Over 70 volunteers have gained knowledge in pest identification, irrigation, fertilization, and propagation. These are skills that are difficult to learn in just the classroom. The nursery provides the opportunity for socialization while learning and accomplishing a task. Master Gardeners produced over 2000 plants for the landscaping of the Extension office in 2012. In 2015, they contributed 1048 hours to produce 3782 native plants while averaging the use of 18 gallons of water daily. Approximately 500 homeowners visited the site annually to consult with trained volunteers. The hands-on experiential learning has enabled Master Gardeners to better advise citizens on implementation techniques for their own property.

The Master Gardener Nursery Project at the Okaloosa County Extension office was established in 2001 with the following objectives:

1. Proactively prepare Master Gardener volunteers to assist residents with “Florida-Friendly” landscaping and native plant use.
2. Provide hands-on education on plant production issues that will enable Master Gardeners to sustain an operation that will aid with fund raising and community horticultural support.
3. Demonstrate the proper nursery techniques than increase plant survivability without degradation of natural resources.

### Materials and Methods

The target audience was identified as veteran Master Gardeners. Graduates of the 1995–2000 classes were eager to contribute to horticulture education in Okaloosa County. Geographically, the county transitions from a coastal ecosystem in the south to an uplands pine forest habitat in the north. Additionally, the travel time can exceed two hours from one end to the other. The home office is located in the north end of the county. When the opportunity to establish a coastal County Extension annex building became available, the Master Garden-

ers quickly established a consistent schedule to staff the south office. Open three hours weekly, coastal residents utilized the serve almost immediately. However, there were times that few people visited the office. In order to motivate the Master Gardener graduates of later classes to continue volunteering at the annex, the Commercial Horticulture agent assisted them in establishing an education production nursery on the site in 2001. With assistance from county personnel and donations from Master Gardeners, the space grew to a 1500 sq. ft. productive learning facility with a greenhouse, work area, tables, and hoop houses. The Commercial Horticulture agent served as a trainer and consultant. Volunteers were educated on nursery Best Management Practices, propagation and scouting. Advanced Master Gardener trainings were conducted several times each year. Weekly and monthly reports are recorded documenting water use, propagation stages, insect populations and fertilizer application. Production focused on “Florida-Friendly” plants that were utilized in local planting projects and sold for fund raising. An average of 6000 plants were produced in the nursery each year. Plant material was utilized in Habitat for Humanity home landscapes, installed in demonstration gardens at public buildings as well as providing the 2000 landscape plants needed to complete the new County Extension office built in 2012. The additional plants were sold at the annual Master Gardener native plant sale in order to raise fund to support the following year’s maintenance and production costs.

### Results

- Over 70 volunteers have gained knowledge in pest identification, irrigation, fertilization, and propagation. These

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are skills that are difficult to learn in just the classroom. The hands-on experience enabled Master Gardeners to better advise residents on practices that would be effective in the landscape.

- Approximately 500 homeowners visited the site annually to consult with trained volunteers.
- In 2015, they contributed 1048 hours to produce 3782 native plants while averaging the use of 18 gallons of water daily.

### **Conclusions**

The Master Gardener Nursery Project in Okaloosa County was established in 2001 and has continued to successfully grow over the past 15 years. The Commercial Horticulture Extension agent has utilized experiential learning to improve the skills of the volunteers, while providing an essential service to residents and the community. Horticultural education on “Florida-Friendly” landscaping and the utilization of native plants has increased public awareness of natural resource issues related to the urban landscape.