



Expanding Community Outreach through Master Gardener-funded Demonstration Garden Grants: Pilot Program Results

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Over the years, the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension Martin County Master Gardener program has been involved with many community demonstration garden projects, but the educational focus, community involvement, and Extension awareness in the gardens were not fully realized. Several gardens were provided with budgets on an annual basis, though the funds were often under-utilized and the gardens were generally lacking in educational features and Extension signage. At the same time, community groups regularly approached the Martin County Master Gardener Coordinator seeking funds and guidance to establish new gardens.

Seeing an opportunity for improvement, the Master Gardener Coordinator proposed a new Community Demonstration Garden Grant Program. During the first budget year (2015), the Coordinator proposed setting aside some funds for a pilot grant offering. For the 2016 budget, volunteers were supportive of shifting funds from individual gardens into the new grant. Funds would only be awarded to gardens presenting plans that included educational outreach and community involvement, and all participating gardens would be required to install signage recognizing the contribution of the UF/IFAS Extension Martin County Master Gardener program. Volunteers printed the first batch of Demonstration Garden signs. Grant funds become seed money to establish or expand a garden with dedicated community partners responsible for future garden maintenance; Master Gardener volunteers serve as garden mentors, providing guidance and education on Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ practices. The grant program, managed by volunteers with oversight and guidance from the Master Gardener Coordinator, has been a good way to expand educational outreach and community partnerships.

In establishing the grant program, the team wanted to make the process clear and fair. To that end, facilitators of the existing Master Gardener Demonstration Gardens developed a grant application that includes an evaluation rubric based on commitment

to education, demonstration of measurable outcomes, public access, management plans, and commitment to Florida-Friendly Landscaping™. Volunteers offered grant-writing workshops during each award cycle and reviewed applications.

So far, two grant cycles have been offered. The first, with two applicants in July 2015, presented awards to 1) a local domestic violence shelter (SafeSpace) for a vegetable garden, and 2) to a local Montessori school for their butterfly, recipe, sensory, and alphabet gardens. After participating in the grant-funded Montessori school garden, 74% of students either started or increased gardening fruits and/or vegetables at home, 96% reported they now eat more fruits and vegetables, and 89% indicated they now get outside more often (Table 1). A post-reflective Likert scale survey revealed Montessori student (n = 27) knowledge gains of 30% to 37% in areas such as “deciding when to plant veggies/fruits” and “how plants grow.”

During the second grant cycle in October 2015, the program received applications from four organizations, two of which had not previously collaborated with UF/IFAS Extension Martin County. Awardees have contributed photos, narratives and survey results documenting their progress.

Lessons learned through the pilot program include the need to offer more assistance in quantifying outcomes/impacts and highlight the value of the program to Master Gardener volunteers. So far, only one of the gardens has quantified outcomes using a survey provided by the Coordinator. More outcome/impact training and standard surveys are needed for volunteers. To continue expanding the program, we need to show value through recognition in newspapers, awards and other venues. By offering garden grants, the UF/IFAS Extension Martin County Master Gardener program can educate more residents and engage more community partners than was possible when volunteers were limited to long-term garden maintenance roles.

Table 1. Participant lifestyle changes as a result of participating in the grant-funded Montessori school garden

Topic	Started since participated in school garden project	Increased since participated in school garden project	Have not started and do not plan to
Growing fruits/veggies at home	30%	44%	26%
Eating more fruits/veggies	19%	78%	4%
Getting outside more	11%	78%	11%

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