The Master Gardener (MG) program in Pinellas County has an average of 145 active members per year. Though every new class of volunteers increases those numbers, there is always a slow attrition of existing volunteers. This balance keeps the overall numbers fairly steady over time. Some reasons volunteers leave service include moving, returning to work, health and family issues, and trying other experiences. Training classes are held almost every year. In 2014 there was not a new class, so by the time 2015 came around, more volunteers than usual were needed. The decision was made to have a class of 40 MG trainees in 2015, when a typical class would have been 20–25. Within the first two weeks three trainees dropped out for health and family issues, so the final class roster was 37. Such a large class presented administrative, instructional, and social challenges. The MG Project Expo was designed to address those challenges.

The overall objective was to increase available volunteers (and volunteer time) for important community projects. The educational approach was a hands-on, real-world MG project that also encouraged trainee social interaction. At the beginning of the training, all were assigned a group (or individual if needed) project that would be the kind of project Master Gardeners work on in the “real” world. The hope was that working on these projects would invest new MGs in a project they enjoy. Project examples include creating displays, exhibits, setting up a booth at a farmers’ market, and creating a presentation for the community or demonstration gardens. Groups formed organically and generated their own project ideas with the agent’s approval. Although group projects were encouraged, a small number of volunteers completed individual projects. Time was spent during each weekly training class to discuss and allow groups to work together, although much of the work was done outside of class.

Trainees still have two months to complete volunteer hours and 78% (n = 37) of them either exceed, meet or are on track to meet the required 75 hours of volunteer service. Of note is that the three MG trainees with the least volunteer hours all completed individual projects, thus missing the social interaction. Individual volunteer hours vary from zero to over 500 hours, with a class average of over 95 hours each in the first ten months of service. Project success stories include a brand new quarterly MG newsletter, a new farmers’ market presence, a display about the role of MGs, and a community beautification project.

This program could easily be replicated in any county with a “Master” volunteer program requiring volunteer service for certification. It is wise to plan time every class for groups to meet and block out time near the end of the training for the official project expo where MG trainees present projects (Fig. 1). A potential challenge is that this asks more of each trainee than just attending class, creating a more rigorous and time consuming course. The pay-off of invested and excited volunteers with a clear path to volunteering is high!

Fig. 1. Master Gardeners present their group projects during the Master Gardener Expo, April 2015, Largo, FL. Photo: UF/IFAS.

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