



## Serving Our Stakeholders: An Advanced Master Gardener Training/Tour Series

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University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Science (UF/IFAS) Extension Master Gardener volunteers assist extension programs in Walton County by reaching over 5000 clients annually. Many interactions clientele have with extension are with Master Gardeners, thus it is imperative that Master Gardeners be trained in customer service techniques. Since these skills were not addressed in the initial training course for Master Gardeners, an advanced training/tour series was devised to teach and reinforce those necessary skills. The series, to date, has consisted of nine, two-hour training sessions and was designed for an audience of 25 Master Gardeners per class. Intended outcomes were for 75% of participants to gain knowledge on topics including resources available to Master Gardeners, presentation delivery, office administrative skills, customer service techniques, plant propagation, landscape design, soil test analysis, and plant production/marketing systems. In addition, 50% of attendees were expected to use these techniques in interactions with clientele. The workshops included a one-hour presentation on customer service topics and a one-hour, hands-on component that allowed participants to navigate resource sites on their computers, prepare a presentation, field clientele questions in a live scenario, and demonstrate proper email and telephone etiquette. In total, 153 Master Gardeners attended the events and 27 completed an end of program evaluation. Evaluations indicated an average of 85% gained knowledge across all programs with a follow-up survey indicating that 100% of participants have used the knowledge gained in clientele interactions.

Walton County Master Gardener volunteers assist University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Science (UF/IFAS) extension programs by directly reaching over 5000 clients annually. Many of the first interactions that clientele have with extension programs are with Master Gardeners, and thus, it is imperative that Master Gardeners be well trained in basic customer service principles and techniques, office administrative skills, handling of difficult clients and proper presentation delivery. Since these skills were not addressed in the initial training course for Master Gardeners, an advanced training series was devised to teach and reinforce those necessary skills.

### Materials and Methods

The series consisted of three separate two-hour training sessions and was designed for a minimum audience of 25 Master Gardeners. The intended outcomes were for 75% of participants to gain knowledge on topics including resources available to Master Gardener volunteers, proper presentation delivery, office administrative skills, basic customer service principles and techniques, and handling of difficult-to-deal-with clientele.

The workshops each began with a one-hour presentation on customer service. Topics included online and print resources available to Master Gardener volunteers, proper presentation delivery, office administrative skills, basic customer service principles and techniques, and handling of difficult-to-deal-with clientele. The hands-on second hour of each workshop allowed

participants to navigate Master Gardener resources on their own computers, prepare an actual PowerPoint presentation to deliver to their peers on preselected topics, and field clientele questions/concerns in live scenarios/roleplaying activities, and demonstrate proper email and telephone etiquette required of University of Florida volunteers.

### Results and Discussion

In all, 29 Master Gardeners attended the events and thirteen completed an end of program evaluation. Evaluations returned indicated that 85% gained knowledge on Master Gardener online and print resources, 77% gained knowledge on proper presentation construction and delivery, 77% gained knowledge on office administrative procedures, 85% gained knowledge on basic customer service principles and 92% gained knowledge on handling difficult clientele. A follow-up survey found that one hundred percent of participants have actually used the knowledge gained in clientele interactions.

### Conclusions

This advanced Master Gardener series was very effective in imparting critical customer service principles and skills. Not only did more than 75% of attendees gain knowledge in each section taught, every attendee used what they learned in actual interactions with clientele at extension sponsored events. Having proven to enhance Master Gardener volunteer's abilities to deliver programming and interact with clientele, this training series could be adapted and used in Master Gardener trainings statewide.

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