FLORIDA MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM: A BRIEF HISTORY

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Abstract. Today the Master Gardener program is the backbone of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service’s educational outreach to the gardening public. It is active in over fifty Florida counties, including all of the populous areas of the state. It is hard to imagine a time when Extension did business without the help of these dedicated volunteers. But prior to 1979, county agents statewide had to deal alone with a burgeoning population’s insatiable appetite for information on growing all sorts of plants around their newly acquired home-sites. The Master Gardener program came to the rescue here in Florida as it did elsewhere across the nation. Here’s how it started and became part of today’s everyday Extension scene.

In October, 1975, I escorted the Florida delegation of 4-H and FFA state winners in Horticulture to Biloxi, MS, for the National Junior Horticultural Association’s convention. While there on a boat tour to Kings Island, Dr. Robert Wearne, Federal Cooperative Extension Service horticultural programs leader, told me about Washington State’s Master Gardener program.

Upon my return to Gainesville, I wrote a letter (dated Nov. 19, 1975), to Dr. Wearne asking for more information about the Master Gardener program. We were holding a county agents training session (scheduled for January 21-22, 1976 in Tallahassee), and I wanted to share the idea with the county faculty.

Letter as written:

James M. Stephens
Department of Vegetable Crops
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Gainesville, Florida 32611

November 19, 1975

Dr. Robert A. Wearne
USDA
Federal Extension Service
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Bob:

Hope you have gotten over your boat ride by now. Two of our Florida group threw up on the boat.

I am wondering if you have any information you could send me on the Master Gardening Program as it is used elsewhere. We are having an agents-training conference January 21-22, so I would like to inform them of this concept at that time.

Sure would appreciate it.

Sincerely,

James M. Stephens
Associate Professor

January 21-22, 1976. At our vegetable crops two-day training session held in Tallahassee I used the materials received from Wearne to introduce the Master Gardener concept to our county agents.

July, 1977, I went with Bob Black and Julian Sauls to Washington State and Oregon to review the Master Gardener program at its spring-head.

1979, Florida began its program with Susan Gray, Vegetable Crops Department, State Coordinator. Manatee, Brevard, and Dade were the first counties to train. Sept. 18, 1979, during the third week of the 8-week training, I gave vegetable gardening training to 21 Manatee County MG volunteers in Palmetto, traveling alone. Sept. 19, 1979, trained 22 Mgs in Cocoa (Brevard). Sept. 20, 1979, trained 15 Mgs in Miami (8:30-4:30).

Brief Summary of State Coordinators

1. Susan Gray: On Sept. 16, 1974, Susan was hired (OPS) by the Vegetable Crops Department to assist Jim Stephens in 4-H and gardening programs, while attending graduate school. Susan was formerly an outstanding 4-H member from Marion County, with a degree in Ornamental Horticulture. When the Master Gardener program began in 1979, Susan became its first statewide coordinator. Upon completion of a Master’s Degree program in June, 1981, Susan was replaced by Ann McDonald.

2. Ann McDonald: In July, 1981, Ann began a Master’s degree program in Vegetable Crops and became the second state Master Gardener coordinator. Ann was formerly an outstanding 4-H member from St. Johns County, with a degree in Ornamental Horticulture, UF.

3. Jim Stephens: In the fall of 1983, Ann departed the University of Florida. Agents expressed a desire to install more credibility to this important program by having a full faculty member in charge. Professor Jim Stephens agreed to serve as the third coordinator. He was authorized by Dr. App to find a replacement for Ann to assist with the program.

4. Kathleen Delate: In March, 1984, a state-wide search brought in Kathleen Delate who had worked with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Master Gardener program in Collier County before joining the Vegetable Crops Department. While assisting Jim Stephens with the Master Gardener program, Kathleen began a Master’s degree program in Vegetable Crops.

In 1985, Kathleen became the fourth Master Gardener coordinator, and the program was continued in the Vegetable Crops Department.

In December, 1986, Kathleen departed after earning an MS degree in Vegetable Crops (Horticultural Sciences), and in the spring of 1987, she enrolled at the UC - Berkeley’s Entomology Department, on Temporary Assignment (TA) to pursue a Ph.D. degree.
5. **Bob Black:** In 1987, for a brief period following the departure of Kathleen Delate, there was no official state leader. After a mid-summer shortened version of the Advanced Training Conference, program leadership was transferred from Vegetable Crops to the OH Department. In September, Bob Black, Ornamental Home Horticulture specialist, assumed the role of fifth State Leader for the Master Gardener program, and was joined by Kathleen C. Ruppert as the Assistant Leader. Note: Kathleen Carlton Ruppert had completed a Master’s degree thesis in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, where she studied the effectiveness of the fledgling Florida program in the counties of Brevard, Dade, and Manatee.

6. **Kathleen Ruppert:** In 1993, Kathleen became the sixth State Leader.

7. **Joan Bradshaw:** About 1996, Kathleen Ruppert took another position with IFAS, and Pinellas County extension agent Joan Bradshaw became the seventh state leader of the MG program. She eventually came to the EH Dept.

8. **Sonja Skelly:** After Joan left in June 1999, Sonja became the eighth state leader. She made arrangements for the Advanced Training Conference, which was narrated by the eighth state leader. She made arrangements for the MG program. She eventually came to the EH Dept.

9. **Tom Wichman:** In December, 1999 Tom Wichman assumed the role of ninth state leader of the Master Gardener program. He is currently housed in the Environmental Horticulture Department, Fifield Hall.

**Summary of Events by Year**

**1972**
Dr. David Gibby, Washington’s King County Hort agent, conceived idea and put MGs in clinics.

In Florida, Extension began a series of annual Florida Seeds and Garden Supply Association (FSGSA) meetings around state where store employees were trained to help answer gardening questions. This established a framework for specialists to train volunteers.

**1973**
Dr. Bernie Wesenberg, WSU Hort Specialist, held his first classes for Puget Sound.

**1974**
On September 16, Susan Gray began working in the Vegetable Crops Dept. assisting Jim Stephens with 4H and gardening program. Farther south in Palmetto, another key player, Dr. Jim App, then Manatee County Extension Director, was hosting one of the FSGSA meetings.

**1975**
In October, Stephens heard about the Master Gardener program from Dr. Wearne, Federal Extension Hort leader, in Biloxi while on NJHA tour boat. In November he wrote to Dr. Wearne to get all the details of the MG program. That same year, Dr. App became a District Director of Extension.

**1976**
In January, Stephens informed agents about MG program during county agent training session, in Tallahassee. By now, Dr. App had become Asst. Extension Dean and was at the meeting where he expressed great interest in Florida starting a MG program. Stephens and other specialists were continuing the FSGSA (Seed store) training meetings.

September: Susan Gray took over the lead role with VC department’s youth programs.

**1977**
July: Dr. App sent Hort Specialists Jim Stephens, Bob Black, and Julian Sauls to Seattle, Washington and Eugene, Oregon to investigate the MG program. By now several other states had adopted the program.

**1978**
FSGSA meetings in Tallahassee and Palmetto. Home Hort Agents School held in Gainesville.

Dr. Joe Vandermark, a retired Illinois extension specialist with MG experience, was hired to help us start our Florida MG program. Our first planning meeting was held Dec. 18-20, 1978.

**1979**
Florida MG Pilot Project officially began. Susan Gray, VC Extension Assistant, became first coordinator, with Vandermark consulting, and Home Hort. Committee conducting (Black from OH, Sauls from FC, and Stephens from VC).

Three counties were selected for this pilot project: Brevard (Syl Rose), Dade (Lou Daigle), and Manatee (Marlowe Iverson).

Training was given primarily by State Specialists from Gainesville, beginning on Sept. 4, 1979.

(I had week 3, Sept. 18, 1979, and taught classes as follows: 3 classes: Brevard (22); Dade (15); Manatee (21). State total: 3 counties (58).)

**1980**
3 new 1st classes: Hillsborough (24) with Sydney Feinberg; Polk (10) with Joe Freeman; and Volusia (17), with Linda Brachold.

More classes in Dade and Manatee. State total: 6 counties.

**1981**
1st class graduates: Lake (17) with Russ Swanson; Orange (15) with Tom MacCubbin; and Osceola (19) with Eleanor Foerste. State total: 9 counties, training together in Orlando in Sept.-Oct., given by State Specialists: MacDonald, Sartain, Simone, Short, Dunn, Jackson, Crocker, Stephens, Black, Tja, Henley, Koehler.


June—Susan leaves and Ann McDonald, Visiting Extension Agent, takes over.

1st Annual Advanced training was held in Gainesville, August 1981, Ann McDonald moderator.

**1982**
A total of 11 counties trained a new class in 1982, of which the following seven were initiated: Alachua, Broward, Leon, Marion, Palm Beach, Pasco, Pinellas.

At Lake Yale, a meeting was held to train county Master Gardener staff. All of us specialists with subject matter relating to home horticulture presented the county
agents and staff with slide sets and curriculum guides so that counties could assume the role of training the Master Gardeners. This was a major event (State total: 16 counties).


During the first five years (1979-1983), there were 868 master gardeners trained in 48 classes held around the state.

In September ’83, Ann departed and Jim Stephens became state MG leader.

1984 7 new 1st classes: Citrus, Collier, Escambia, Flagler, Hernando, Highlands, Seminole (State total: 33 counties).

In March, 1984, Kathleen Delate was recruited from Collier County into the Vegetable Crops Dept. to assist Jim Stephens in coordinating the state MG program while she attended graduate school.

The fourth annual State MG Advanced Training Conference was held August 29-30, in the Reitz Union; the Awards ceremony was in Livestock Pavilion (the infamous “Fly” chicken BBQ). 167 MGs attended from 22 counties.

1985 3 new counties: Monroe, Hendry, and Okeechobee (state total: 36 counties).

Responsibility for the Master Gardener program moved from Vegetable Crops Department to the Ornamental Horticulture Department.

1986 1 new county: Bradford (state total: 37 counties).

Kathleen Delate obtained MS degree and left IFAS for Berkley, CA, and the Ph.D.

Jim Stephens and Bob Black acted as state coordinators until Kathleen Ruppert came to the OH Dept. in the fall of 1987. At that time Bob became the official State Master Gardener Program Leader, and Kathleen became the Assistant Master Gardener Program Leader.

The first national Conference of Master Gardeners was held in D.C.

Two new counties: Bay and Santa Rosa (state total: 39 counties).

The following were the 39 counties and coordinators in December 1987:

Alachua (Brinen); Baker (Sweat); Bay (Bunker); Bradford (Taylor); Brevard (Rose); Broward (Pardo); Charlotte (Lambert); Citrus (Johnston); Clay (Zerba); Collier (Litton); Dade (Ritter); Duval (Delvalle); Escambia (Doobis); Flagler (Schrader); Hendry (Townsend); Hernando (Kavouras); Highlands (Hurner); Hillsborough (Park-Brown); Indian River (Futch); Lake (Swanson); Lee (Yingst); Leon (Marshall); Manatee (Duray and Mitchell); Marion (Adams); Martin (Whitty); Monroe (Fisher); Okeechobee (Miller); Orange (Gilbert); Osceola (Foerste); Palm Beach (Teets); Pasco (Steiger); Pinellas (Bradshaw); Polk (Freeman); Putnam (Tilton); St. Johns (Fuller); St. Lucie (Lee); Santa Rosa (Phelps); Seminole (White); Volusia (Brockaway).

In the first nine years (1979-1988), a total of 1759 volunteers had been trained in 164 training sessions held somewhere within the 37 counties in the program.

1987 In August, Bob Black, State MG Leader, and assistant Kathleen Ruppert, hosted the eighth annual Continued Training Conference (Gainesville).

MAGIC (Master Gardeners International Corporation) began in Virginia.

MG newsletter name changed from “Voluntiller” to “Florida Master Gardener News.”

1988 In August, Bob Black, State MG Leader and Assistant Kathleen Carlton Ruppert conducted the ninth annual advanced training conference.

1992 Master Gardener training materials were placed on CDROM for county use.

Bob Black, State MG Leader and Kathleen Ruppert, Assistant State Leader, conducted twelfth annual Advanced Training Conference (Gainesville).

1993 Kathleen Ruppert served as state leader for MG program through 1996.

1997 Joan Bradshaw became state leader.

1999 June, 1999 Sonja Skelly became state leader (temporary).

December, 1999, Tom Wichman became state leader.

2000 Tom Wichman moved to the Environmental Horticulture Department.

2001 Tom arranged the International Master Gardener Conference, in May. In Lake Buena Vista Hilton.

Power-point presentation: I collaborated with Hillsborough Extension Agent Sydney Park-Brown in preparing a Power-point slide presentation based on the book “Vegetable Gardening in Florida." This presentation will become the official training curriculum for MG Basic Training, replacing the old “You Can Grow Vegetables” (parts I-IV) slide sets.