Advanced Master Gardener Training to Improve Service at Plant Clinics

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The objective of this project was to increase the knowledge, skills, and confidence levels of our plant clinic Master Gardener volunteers. This agent created an advanced Master Gardener training series to accomplish this. First, a list of critical plant clinic knowledge was identified. The topics chosen were: advanced plant identification; questions to ask clients; what resources (text and electronic) to use; using a microscope; advanced plant pathology for Master Gardeners; common problems of fruit and vegetable crops; landscape and household pest identification and control; and weed identification and control. These topics were divided into ten three-hour classes to be held once a month. Next, a prerequisite of at least eight hours of volunteer service per month at any one of our plant clinic locations was required to qualify for this series. We did this to ensure that the training would be put to use educating clients and not used solely for personal enrichment. We have completed six of the ten classes as of February 2014 and plan to complete the series in June 2014. The results of the program so far have been very positive. Although it is sometimes difficult to evaluate the impact of this training on our clientele we have noted a decrease in the Master Gardeners reliance on the horticulture staff to answer many client questions. The Master Gardeners taking the classes have reported an average of 60% increase in knowledge over the course so far and report feeling more confident when working with plant clinic clients.

In Pinellas County we have three separate Master Gardener plant clinic locations to reach clients in north, central, and south county. The main Extension office is in Largo (central), Weedon Island Preserve in St. Petersburg (south), and the Palm Harbor Library (north). The plant clinic at the Extension Office has two horticulture program assistants who manage the plant clinic but the other locations are run autonomously by Master Gardener volunteers. Reliance on this agent and horticulture program assistants was reducing the quality of service provided by Master Gardener volunteers and taxing faculty and staff time. The objective of this project was to increase the knowledge, skills, and confidence levels of our plant clinic Master Gardener volunteers in order to improve the customer experience and free up faculty and staff time.

Method

First, a list of critical plant clinic knowledge was identified by horticulture faculty and staff. The topics chosen were: advanced plant identification; questions to ask clients; what resources (text and electronic) to use; using a microscope; advanced plant pathology for Master Gardeners; common problems of fruit and vegetable crops; landscape and household pest identification and control; and weed identification and control. These topics were divided into ten three-hour classes to be held once a month. Next, a prerequisite (and ongoing corequisite) of at least eight hours of volunteer service per month at any one of our plant clinic locations was required to qualify for this series. We did this to ensure that the training would be put to use educating clients and not used solely for personal enrichment.

Results

We have completed nine of the ten classes as of May 2014 and plan to complete the series in June 2014. The results of the program so far have been very positive. Although it is sometimes difficult to evaluate the impact of this training on our clientele we have noted a decrease in the Master Gardeners reliance on the horticulture staff to answer many client questions. The Master Gardeners taking the classes (n=21) have reported an average of 60% increase in knowledge over the course so far and report feeling more confident when working with plant clinic clients.

Conclusions

This Advanced Master Gardener Training Series could be used in any county with Master Gardeners who answer phone, email, or walk-in client questions. Classes could be held in alternating years from new Master Gardener training—one year train a new Master Gardener class, the next year teach an advanced Master Gardener class. The series could also be incorporated into regular monthly trainings and even rely on horticulture program assistants to teach once developed. Continuing program improvement includes identifying new topics for the future such as reporting contacts and other administrative needs and exotic pest updates, and finding a way to share these modules with other Master Gardener coordinators.

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