

FLORIDA'S MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

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Abstract. Brevard, Dade and Manatee counties have for the past year participated in a pilot Master Gardener program in Florida. Hillsborough, Polk and Volusia counties were added to the program in 1980. The basic concept of this program is to train volunteers to aid county Extension personnel in answering the ever-increasing number of homeowner horticultural questions from the public. Program participants must agree to donate a certain number of hours service to the local Extension office in return for the training provided by state Extension specialists. During the first phase of the pilot program, 76 volunteers each received 48 hours of instruction in all areas of horticulture and agreed to return a total of 4,859 hours of service to their respective Extension offices.

Finding efficient, effective methods of distributing educational information to a large public audience has long been a problem for most Extension workers. This problem has become increasingly important to horticultural agents due to the rapid growth in the number of people interested in gardening. It has been estimated that more than 1 out of 3 American families grew a vegetable garden last year. As this growth continues, the demand for homeowner horticultural information has increased greatly with most of these requests being directed to county Extension offices.

Origin of the Master Gardener Program

Since a shortage of trained personnel was the limiting factor in dealing with an ever-increasing public audience, it was felt that trained volunteers might be able to assist local Extension agents in coping with this problem. An Oregon survey indicated that 85 to 90% of all homeowner gardening questions are not highly technical and do not require the response of a professional such as a county Extension horticulturist. This confirmed the belief that a volunteer with proper training and gardening experience could satisfactorily answer most questions. In 1972, 2 Extension workers at Washington State University designed a program to help solve this problem. Such was the origin of the Master Gardener program and 25 states have since adopted similar programs. (1)

The basis of the Master Gardener program is to recruit and train volunteers to help meet the increased demands being placed on county Extension personnel. Volunteers receive from 30-60 hours of training and then work an equivalent number of hours in local Extension programs. It is interesting to note that most volunteers serve more than the required number of hours. A 1979 national survey showed that in states utilizing Master Gardeners, 2,516 volunteers provided 91,651 hours of service during the year. (3)

Volunteers can aid horticultural programs in many ways. These services vary from responding to personal, telephone and mail requests for information in a local Extension office to presenting plant diagnostic clinics in shopping areas and community centers and providing programs or talks for civic or garden clubs.

One of the more unique services provided has been in Oregon. Since 1977, 3 Master Gardener volunteers have

worked with students at a private school for the mentally handicapped. A demonstration garden and fruit orchard were designed under the guidance of the Master Gardeners. The goal of the project has been to teach students skills necessary for working in horticultural jobs when they leave the school. Two students have each completed 2 years of employment with local seed companies. (4)

The Florida Program

The Florida Master Gardener program was conceived in 1976 when 3 Extension horticulturists from the University of Florida visited Washington and Oregon to observe those programs. Based on information obtained and on the increased demands for gardening information placed on Florida Extension agents, planning for a pilot program began early in 1979. Brevard, Dade and Manatee counties were selected for the first program because of their large urban populations and varied geographic locations. Extension specialists from 6 departments within the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) along with horticultural agents from the pilot counties were members of the planning committee.

The first task for the committee was to determine the number of volunteers to train and the number of hours required to provide proper training. Each county was asked to limit enrollment to 30 participants. Volunteers were recruited based on their interest in horticulture, their ability and desire to share their knowledge with others and their willingness to make the commitment to return the required number of hours service time to their local Extension offices. The response in some cases was so great that some interested people had to be turned down for the first program. These names were kept on file for future training sessions. Applicants were enthusiastic and eager to learn, and most had some horticultural knowledge and experience.

Training

Developing a comprehensive training schedule was a challenge. Forty-eight to 50 hours of instruction spread over an 8 week period were planned. Training began the first week of September 1979. Participants received 6 hours of instruction, 1 day each week for the 8 weeks. All aspects of homeowner horticulture were discussed beginning with basic soil science, liming and fertilization. Subsequent instruction included fruit, vegetable and ornamental plant culture, propagation, pest diagnosis and control, proper use of pesticides and household pest control. State Extension specialists conducted the training and provided fact sheets and other publications to go into a reference notebook for each participant. To complement the classroom instruction, local horticultural agents planned field trips, tours and hands-on training to increase awareness of horticultural interests, plant materials and problems within their own counties.

Following the intensive 8 week training period, all participants took a comprehensive examination designed to test not only their knowledge but also their ability to deal with situational problems. Of the 78 persons who began in 1979, 76 successfully completed both the training and exam phases of the program and became Florida's first Master Gardeners. Graduates received certificates imprinted with their names and signed by the Dean for Extension and their local Extension agent.

Returns from the program became evident when the training and examination were completed and the Master Gardeners began to fulfill their service commitments. Many have far exceeded the required number of hours and want to keep working. Two volunteers in Manatee County have provided a total of 450 hours of service. They enjoy the contact with other homeowners and are constantly looking for more information to add to their training. Monthly meetings, tours and seminars have been coordinated by local Extension agents to provide current up-to-date information and additional training.

Service has been rendered in a variety of ways. Master Gardeners in Manatee County, for example, have spent at least 8 hours in the county Extension office before being assigned elsewhere. During this period they learned about the Cooperative Extension Service and what it has to offer through the local office and staff. They also learned to run pH and soluble salt soil tests. Experience at handling telephone, written and walk-in requests for horticultural information has also been obtained from time spent in the office.

Many Master Gardeners conduct plant clinics at various locations throughout each county. Locations, dates and times for clinics are advertised and homeowners are encouraged to visit the clinic nearest their homes rather than traveling to the Extension office. Dade County Master Gardeners have worked with a demonstration garden at the Homestead office and have helped organize some community gardens. Volunteers have also been asked to present programs to garden clubs or other civic groups. Some serve as leaders or resource persons for 4-H members interested in horticulture and others have participated in the training of new volunteers. These are only a few of the ways Master Gardeners can contribute to county Extension programs.

Florida's Master Gardener program is still quite young. Three additional counties, Hillsborough, Polk and Volusia, began training volunteers in September 1980 and the 3 pilot counties have expanded their programs by training new volunteers. The training schedule used for new groups is a revised version of the original schedule. An evaluation of the pilot effort helped to identify improvements which were needed and these were implemented.

Interest in the program has continued to grow in Florida and elsewhere. When the Master Gardener program began in Washington in 1972, 180 signed up for the first class. In 1978, 570 volunteers were trained and more than 130,000 citizens sought information from those Master Gardeners during that year. Volunteer time increased to 22,000 hours, more than 10 times the number of hours which could have been supplied by Extension horticulture agents. (2)

The Master Gardener program is a valuable tool of the Cooperative Extension Service for distribution of educational information and providing public service. The service supplied by these volunteers will become even more valuable as interest in food production and all areas of home horticulture continues to grow.

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MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM IN DADE COUNTY

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During the past 25 years over 50,000 homeowners of Dade County have called the Extension office to get information that would help them to correct problems concerning ornamental plants, fruit trees, vegetable gardens and household insects.

Typical questions are:

- What are the best varieties of tomatoes to grow in this area?
- How much fertilizer should be applied to a lawn?
- How can I rid my house of drywood termites?

Over 100 such questions are answered daily. Until three years ago, one ornamental horticulture agent was attempting to satisfy this need. The Master Gardener program that was initiated in this county last year shows much promise in achieving our goal to provide this needed information.

After 48 hours of intensive training, we now have 60

certified Master Gardeners to assist the horticulture agents with our Extension educational programs.

In addition to the many telephone contacts, our Master Gardeners are active in conducting plant clinics; assisting at community and school gardens; assisting and instructing home garden courses. Some have been resource speakers for school science classes and for garden clubs. Other Master Gardeners have assisted neighbors to establish home vegetable gardens and while there, suggest treatments for other plant problems.

This training is conducted by state specialists and county Extension personnel. Basic training is in the areas of tropical fruits, ornamentals and vegetables as well as supporting disciplines such as entomology pathology and nematology.

The selected volunteers receive training one day each week. The 48 hours of instruction is accomplished over a period of 8 weeks.

When training is completed, a comprehensive written examination is given. After passing the exam each volunteer receives a graduation certificate and Master Gardener name badge which identifies him or her as a Florida Master Gardener.

In return for the 48 hours of training each volunteer

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