



The author, a Master Gardener in Maine, works as a garden angel, helping a disabled woman keep up with her garden.

by Aurelia C. Scott

WHEN I lived in New Mexico, I met a woman who knew everything about gardening in the Southwest, from the fruiting habits of piñon pine (*Pinus monophylla*) to how to combat the area's caliche soil. She shared what she knew with a cheerful generosity that made me long to be just like her. As she identified probable fire blight on a crabapple during a garden club meeting one day, I burst out, "How do you know all that?" Her answer was that she had taken the Master Gardener course, and within weeks I signed up for the course myself.

The Master Gardener Program began in 1972 when Dr. David Gibby, then a Washington State University (WSU) Cooperative Extension agent, found himself unable to keep up with the demand for basic gardening information from a public whose interest in home gardening was blossoming. Dr. Gibby and other extension staff

MASTER GARDENERS

**Who are they? What do they do?
How can you become one?**



Master Gardeners like Twilla Hayden developed and maintain the Sara Hite Memorial Rose Garden, in Milwaukie, Oregon.



Master Gardeners, from left, Susan Carly, Peggy Sischo, and Monica Beauchamp test soil at a garden fair.



Trained by the extension service at local universities, Master Gardeners provide a variety of volunteer services to their communities.



The Champaign County Master Gardeners designed and maintain this Idea Garden at the University of Illinois Arboretum, in Urbana. Liz Cardman tends the garden (right).



members came up with the idea of providing knowledgeable amateurs with training from WSU Cooperative Extension faculty, and in return, these gardeners would volunteer to help the Cooperative Extension Service answer home gardening questions. The first 120 Master Gardeners finished training in 1973. That same year, they answered the horticultural questions of more than 7,000 people. Today, the Master Gardener program exists in all 50 states and in four Canadian provinces and answers millions of questions each year.

MASTER GARDENERS HAVE DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

Master Gardeners come from many backgrounds, but what they share is an enthusiasm for gardening. When I moved from New Mexico to Maine, I audited the Master Gardener course there to learn about gardening in a different climate. The members of my class included teachers, artists, at-home parents, the newly retired, a seaweed farmer, a doctor, and a nun. The youngest of the group, which included both men and women, was about 25, the oldest in her mid-70s. They all described themselves as I did: longtime amateur gardeners who knew a lot about some aspects of gardening and less about most. Some had a specific reason for becoming a Master Gardener, like learning how to plant a garden at a child's school, but most wanted simply to learn more about what they sort-of knew.

Master Gardener trainees pay about \$60 for materials, and they receive approximately 50 hours of instruction from their county extension office at no charge. The instruction may be during the week or on weekends, depending on each state's program. Some states, such

as Oregon and Wisconsin, have put their training online. The training may include both ornamental horticulture and vegetable gardening, or these topics may be divided into two courses. The course culminates in a three-and-a-half-hour exam. Once you pass the exam, you are a certified Master Gardener. Then you can fulfill the rest of the bargain—40 hours of volunteer work for your county Cooperative Extension Service during the first year, and 20 to 40 hours (depending on the county) annually thereafter to remain certified.

THESE VOLUNTEERS SERVE IN MANY WAYS

A Master Gardener's original role was to help the extension service answer plant questions. Many Master Gardeners do this by staffing plant-diagnosis tables at libraries, flower shows, and fairs, and by running garden hotlines. For their first five years with the Bernalillo County, New Mexico, Master Gardener program, volunteers there are asked to spend 20 of their 40 annual hours on the county's garden hotline.

"It is scary at first," says Master Gardener Carolyn Lindberg. "You are so motivated to give people the solution that you tend to want to dive in; you have to teach yourself to listen and ask questions. That's what the training drives home: Don't jump to conclusions, don't be afraid to ask questions, and don't be afraid to say, 'I don't know, I'll look it up.' I call them back the next day with the answer."

In addition to answering questions that come into the office, Master Gardeners increasingly are initiating community outreach projects in underserved communities. They establish community gardens in low-income housing complexes,

teach school children how to keep the environment safe, train neighborhoods to monitor water quality, design accessible gardens for the elderly and disabled, and run workshops on every aspect of vegetable, herb, and ornamental gardening.

Jan and Wayne Martine, for example, work three vegetable gardens with prisoners at the Delaware Correctional Center. The men learn enough about gardening to regularly win county fair prizes for their vegetables. They also learn patience and perseverance. "Some of the men have gotten jobs in gardening after their release," reports Jan. "And they don't come back to jail."

Another Master Gardener, Norman Steel, has taught soil science and seed starting classes, but it is the Plant a Row for the Hungry program that has captured his heart. "This is the program I'm going to stay with," he says. "It fits with my wanting to give back to the community." Last year, for Plant a Row, he harvested and contributed 4,124 pounds of vegetables to Cumberland County, Maine, food pantries.

I have also chosen to do community outreach to fulfill my volunteer hours. In New Mexico, I worked in a children's garden teaching about gardening and ecology, while in Maine I'm a "garden angel" for a disabled woman who cannot keep up with her beloved garden.

Oregon's Master Gardener coordinator, Ann Marie VanDerZanden, cannot imagine how the extension service would manage without the help of Master Gardeners, which is why she recently calculated their financial value to the state. In 2000, Oregon's 2,052 Master Gardeners donated to the program enough hours to equal the work of 57.5 full-time extension employees. This translates into a dollar value of approximately \$1,708,060.

Becoming a MASTER GARDENER



To find out how to become a Master Gardener or to ask a Master Gardener for gardening advice, contact your local extension agent at the Cooperative Extension Service (CES).

Extension agents are university employees who run the Master Gardener program as well as support the community by disseminating "useful and practical" information about agriculture, gardening, and home economics. Cooperative Extension Services are typically located at each state's land grant university (often the state university) and can be found by looking in the phone book under the Cooperative Extension Service (for example, Michigan State University Cooperative Extension) or under the county government listing. You can also find more information on various Web sites, including:

- * www.themastergardenshow.com
- * www.MasterGardeners.com
- * www.reeusda.gov/1700/statepartners/usa.htm

The volunteer work done by Master Gardeners has not only helped the Cooperative Extension Service but has also satisfied many of the participants beyond their expectations. Shirley Simpson, who has spent 14 years teaching adults and underprivileged children about organic gardening, says, "A Master Gardener is a giving sort of person who also wants to learn. And we're lucky people. We start off wanting to share and end up being the ones who gain." ∞

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