

THE MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

A WSU EXTENSION SUCCESS STORY

EARLY HISTORY FROM 1973

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Washington State University Extension initially assigned horticulture faculty to county offices as part of the Agriculture, Home Economics and 4-H outreach education programs. The emphasis of the horticultural programs was crop production. It was not until rapid urban growth and the burgeoning interest in gardening that Extension began to develop programs emphasizing urban horticulture.

In 1971 David Gibby and Bill Scheer, Area Extension Agents, started separate assignments in the major metropolitan areas represented by King and Pierce Counties. They focused respectively on urban and commercial horticulture. However, public demand for information about plant problems was so intense that it made educational programming for either of them virtually impossible.

Initially administrators suggested that getting information out via the mass media would solve that problem. The result was that television and radio gardening shows put on by Gibby served only to make the public aware that the Extension office was the place to get help. Consequently, Gibby and Scheer met to explore other avenues to most effectively address the needs of the home gardener.

Among approaches considered was the concept of recruiting and training volunteers to serve the urban audience. This appeared to be the most feasible option as it would free Gibby and Scheer from constantly reacting to public requests and allow them to be proactive in fulfilling educational requirements.

Recruitment would require a careful selection process, and an appropriate and distinguished title would also be necessary. As both Gibby and Scheer had worked in Germany acquiring language proficiency and understanding of the culture, they knew that Germans bestow titles for hard-earned proficiency levels in various crafts. The top proficiency level in horticulture is denoted by "Gartenmeister," which they anglicized as "Master Gardener." This title would be appropriate for volunteers who had received extensive training.

The volunteer concept was discussed many times before it was taken to various subject-matter specialists at the Western Washington Research and Extension Center (WWREC) in Puyallup. However, the specialists initially rejected the idea of training volunteers.

To test the viability of the concept, in 1972 Gibby organized a trial clinic at the Tacoma Mall featuring specialists to see if the public would demonstrate interest in receiving gardening information. In preparation he wrote articles for the Tacoma newspapers and aired spots on television. The resulting demand was far greater than the specialists had expected. They were now convinced and committed to help train volunteers, and Gibby was now able to take the project to the next level.

He had arranged for Steve Lorton, with Sunset Magazine, to cover the trial clinic, who wrote an article for the Northwest edition under the caption "Wanted: Expert Gardeners to Become Master Gardeners." There were about 600 initial inquiries. Gibby interviewed all applicants and accepted 300. In the meantime, Scheer continued his work in commercial horticulture, but helped teach MG classes for the next 20 years.

Recollections vary as to how many people were trained that first time, although a fair estimate would be about 200. Ed Hume, media gardening expert, was an honorary trainee. He provided valuable help in advertising the program and continued to do so.

The next step was to develop a training curriculum. Subject matter was to include culture of ornamental plants, lawns, vegetables and fruits; control of plant diseases, insects and weeds; and the safe use of pesticides. Sessions were to be held eight hours per day, one day a week, for five weeks. At the end of the training, volunteers were required to pass subject matter exams, as well as an exam for pesticide licensing by the Washington State Department of Agriculture. Master Gardeners were then committed to volunteering a specified number of hours working with the gardening public.

Faculty specialists from the WWREC Center and county faculty participated in teaching. The first training sessions in King County took place at the Renton Library and in Pierce County at the Tacoma Grange Hall during the spring of 1973. Later that same year training was provided Spokane by Horticulture Extension Agent David Bosley, making the new program a statewide endeavor.

Funds in the amount of \$500 were needed to stock the first clinics staffed by Master Gardeners, but Gibby's application was turned down by University Extension administration. A second submittal written by Gibby, and signed by Arlen Davison, Extension Plant Pathologist at the WWREC, was eventually approved.

By the end of 1973 Gibby resigned from WSU to take leadership in ornamental nursery production with the Weyerhaeuser Company. Sharon Collman, who had been working as program assistant with Gibby, became King County Extension Agent and continued managing the program for several years. She is credited with building a solid foundation for the program, as well as promoting and expanding it. She held the program together under the hardship of long hours during a time of budgetary constraints. She also helped other Extension offices establish Master Gardener programs in Washington and in other states. During this period the Pierce County program was ably guided by Nancy Hibbing, a program assistant.

About a year after Collman took over, Blair Adams was hired to replace Gibby in the Area position. Later, when Adams became the Extension Horticulture Specialist at the WWREC in Puyallup, George Pinyuh was hired in 1976 as his replacement and held this position until his retirement in 1994. At the time of his hiring, Master Gardener program management in King County shifted to George Pinyuh. Collman then concentrated on community outreach, horticultural program development and training Master Gardeners in advanced diagnosis of plant problems and integrated pest management. In 1986, because of budget shortfalls, the King County position was eliminated and Collman moved to the Snohomish County Extension Office. The Master Gardeners, in turn, assisted in processing the increased volume of plant problem specimens arriving from the expanded number of clinics.

In the meantime, Bernard Wesenberg, Extension Ornamental Horticulture Specialist at the WWREC, promoted the MG program nationwide and took on a significant coordinating role. Davison, by then State Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources Program Leader and later WWREC Superintendent, promoted the program within administration and was responsible for funding Program Assistants in various counties.

During the long tenure of George Pinyuh as Area Extension Agent (Faculty Excellence Award recipient), the program continued to expand in the number of volunteers, the number of plant clinics and new volunteer roles. He also established the individual County and State Master Gardener Foundations. The WSU Extension Master Gardener Resource Center at the University of Washington Center for Urban Horticulture is another Pinyuh accomplishment.

After five years of being a program assistant with Pinyuh, Mary Robson became the Area Extension faculty from 1994 until 2004. She worked closely with Pinyuh to improve program efficacy and establish a good working relationship with the University of Washington, raising \$80,000 to create an office at the Center for Urban Horticulture.

As time progressed, the program received the credibility and recognition it well deserved.

It is not possible to name all who have made significant contributions to this program over the years. The list includes many faculty members and dedicated program assistants, who started MG programs statewide and deserve much credit. Many of the program assistants are themselves, unpaid volunteers.

To better manage the urban horticulture educational efforts statewide, a Master Gardener Volunteer Coordinator position was funded. Van Bobbitt held this post from 1989 to 1998, attaining excellent results promoting the program around the state and building further support from WSU administration. The position was later held by Rod Tinnemore from 2001 until 2006. In addition, from 2005 to 2007, Linda Chalker-Scott held the position of WSU Master Gardener Program Curriculum Director.

In January of 2008, Associate Vice President and Dean of WSU Extension, Linda Kirk Fox created for the first time a state Master Gardener Program Leader position within WSU Extension and appointed Tonie Fitzgerald to provide leadership on a statewide basis. She supervised the creation of a new Master Gardener Manual, a new online statewide MG training program, and was responsible for WSU hosting the first National Master Gardener Coordinator Conference in Spokane in 2012.

In 2017, there were almost 3500 Master Gardener volunteer educators across the state reporting more than 300,000 volunteer hours. Each Master Gardener receives extensive classroom and online training in horticulture and environmental stewardship before volunteering as a community educator in their county. Some of been volunteering for more than 35 years.

The Master Gardener program, which began as a response to a need for information on gardening and pest management—essentially answering questions and providing answers—has evolved into a proactive partner with other agencies in addressing horticulture, environmental and social issues covering such topics integrated pest management, natural yard care, low-impact development, rain gardens, composting, and edible gardening, to name but a few. They do this through a mix of demonstration gardens, classes, lectures, workshops, demonstrations, writing, and other outreach activities. Many local garden writers, television and radio personalities have been Master Gardeners.

The horticulture “Master” volunteer concept was so effective that it has spread throughout the United States, Canada, and South Korea. It has been adopted by various other disciplines of WSU Extension such as food preservation, animal husbandry and resource conservation, e.g. Master Composters, Master Food Preservers, Livestock Advisors, Master Recyclers, Beach Watchers, and Sustainable Community Stewards.

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