

WSU Snohomish County Extension Master Gardeners

WSU Snohomish County Extension Master Gardener (MG) Volunteers are trained community educators, working as unpaid but valued staff for WSU Extension serving the citizens of Snohomish County. Master Gardeners provide research-based information on a wide variety of horticulture issues, including plant problem diagnosis and treatment, environmentally sound gardening practices, water conservation, pest identification, Integrated Pest Management, Natural Yard Care, and plant selection, installation, and maintenance.

Each volunteer is required to donate a minimum number of both service hours and continuing education hours annually. Their first year they must also participate in an extensive basic training program designed to prepare them to be Volunteer Community Educators in Horticulture and Environmental Stewardship.

MG basic training covers such topics horticulture and botany, soil science, integrated pest management, weed identification and management, plant pathology and plant problem diagnosis, entomology, pesticide safety, vegetable and fruit crops, landscape ornamentals, planting and pruning of trees, and home lawns. It includes approximately 60 hours of classroom instruction over three months plus 3-5 hours a week spent on homework and online training using their home computer. The goal is to teach MGs how to find the answers to questions when asked, but not to know them. No memorization is required, and all training quizzes and tests are open book, multiple choice, and graded pass/fail.

After initial training, working at plant diagnostic clinics is a primary activity of Master Gardeners, both at seasonal community clinics and at the permanent office clinic location at Willis Tucker Park south of Snohomish. MG volunteers handle walk-up questions about horticulture problems and practices at community clinics, while at office clinic they also answer telephone and email inquiries. Master Gardeners learn to use a variety of resources to identify plant materials, diagnose plant problems, identify insects and insect damage, detect plant diseases, determine incorrect cultural practices, etc. This enables them to provide appropriate recommendations for treatment and management of horticultural problems and provide information on safe and effective gardening and landscaping practices.

Snohomish County also has three demonstration gardens that educate gardeners about plant materials and gardening techniques. MGs not only plant and maintain the gardens but also use the gardens to teach the public about sustainable gardening. Instruction might involve appropriate plant selection including native and drought tolerant plants, food gardening, low water-use gardening techniques, and a wide variety of specialty gardening.

Master Gardeners also serve the program in a variety of other ways. They are in demand as public speakers, where they develop and give talks and demonstrations on their favorite gardening topics. Some work with school, 4-H or other youth programs to involve children in gardening. Volunteers who enjoy writing can participate in the research and writing of

brochures and articles. Others work on specialty projects such as the rain garden and natural yard care initiatives, and Growing Groceries, a program to mentor and teach people how to raise their own fresh produce. Many are involved the Snohomish County Master Gardener Foundation, which supports the MG Program in a variety of ways to include a winter speaker series, and an annual plant sale.

Because there are so many ways for Master Gardeners to use their knowledge and serve our community, they have the opportunity to develop new skills as well as engage in their passion for gardening. Over the long term, they will continue to broaden their horticulture knowledge and develop interpersonal, organizational and leadership abilities. And for many Master Gardeners, the friendships, the camaraderie, and the pure delight of working with people of shared interests toward a collective and worthwhile goal keeps them in the program year after year.

One definition of a sustainable garden is that it thrives with minimal inputs of labor, water, fertilizer, and pesticides. The WSU Master Gardener Volunteer Program thrives on enthusiastic inputs of training, knowledge, ability, time, energy and dedication, and produces maximum outputs of community education, personal development, environmental improvement, and volunteer satisfaction.

For more information, contact:

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