

# Becoming a Master Gardener

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## Talking dirt (and roots and blossoms) in your community

Have you ever thought about becoming a master gardener? Whether you are passionate about growing the perfect vegetable or flower garden or just yearning to learn more about sound gardening practices, enrolling in the master gardener program will likely be a personal investment that pays back in enrichment for you and your community for many years to come.

As a graduate of the Skagit County Master Gardener program, I can attest that the allure of “learning it all” and becoming a “master” in all things gardening is powerfully motivating. It was easy to get lost in the notion that this excellent training program would magically transform me into a gardener with all of the answers to every vexing problem or question Mother Nature could throw at me. Well, that doesn’t happen; you don’t learn all of the answers. But you do learn to diagnose problems, research solutions and find the answers you are looking for.

## The Training

The Skagit County Master Gardener training program is a ten-week curriculum composed of 25 online computer training modules combined with weekly, hands-on training labs. The lab sessions are held every Tuesday from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. Topics for each weekly training session include botany, plant identification, entomology, plant pathology, composting, integrated pest management and a host of other fascinating subjects. Students will truly feel they are being trained in a variety of topics worthy of the title “Master Gardener.”

The training program is academically rigorous, and can require up to 16 hours a week of focused study time to learn the material and pass the weekly on-line quiz. However, if you have a passion to learn, our master gardener veterans will offer plenty of support. New trainees (interns) are matched with experienced master gardeners to facilitate training and ensure success.

## Volunteering

Once your training is complete, the real fun begins! In order to earn the honor of becoming a certified master gardener, interns must complete 60 hours of volunteer community service in their first year. For many interns, this is when they learn what becoming a master gardener is truly about: becoming a volunteer community educator. What does that mean? Well, it means neighbors teaching neighbors about:

- Applying sound gardening practices in the landscape
- Growing fruits and vegetables, herbs, houseplants, etc.
- Pruning trees and shrubs
- Identifying beneficial and harmful insects
- Researching plant diseases and how best to treat them

- Applying integrated pest management (IPM)
- Improving soils with compost, mulch, etc.
- Utilizing rain gardens
- And much, much more!

Master gardener volunteers also have the honor of designing and maintaining the Discovery Garden on Memorial Highway in Mount Vernon. This is certainly the gardening jewel of Skagit Valley and a wonderful community resource for learning about gardens and gardening in the Pacific Northwest.

Following the first year commitment of 60 volunteer hours, veteran master gardeners continue to give a minimum of 25 volunteer hours, along with 10 hours of continuing education, annually.



Master Gardener Janet Berger explains to Bridger Tautvydas and Luke Lowery of La Conner how to gently handle a seedling in the Dig It! (Discover in Gardening is Terrific) program at the Discovery Garden in Mount Vernon. **Photo by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners**

### **What do master gardeners do?**

Projects and functions carried out by Master Gardeners are based on the educational priorities of individual counties and communities. Some of the ways in which Skagit County master gardeners have been involved include:

- Researching and answering questions at MG Plant Clinics
- Writing articles and public speaking about gardening
- Setting up demonstration projects in public places
- Advising on school and community gardens
- Maintaining the Skagit County Master Gardener's Discovery Garden as an educational resource
- Organizing and staffing the annual fundraiser MG Plant Fair
- Teaching children how to garden
- Staffing county fair informational booths
- Increasing awareness of integrated pest management, water quality conservation and other environmental issues

Regardless of how you choose to serve in your community, you will enjoy the support and camaraderie of fellow master gardeners who help to plan and organize educational events. Many lasting friendships are forged when people who love gardening work together to promote sound gardening practices.

### **Qualifications**

Skagit County master gardeners are looking for individuals who have a basic interest and knowledge about landscape and food gardening along with enthusiasm for acquiring and sharing horticultural knowledge and skills. If you possess an interest in teaching others, have a flexible time schedule to allow participation in the program, and are willing to volunteer on horticultural projects that meet the goals of the county's WSU Extension Program, the Master Gardener Program is for you.

### **How to Apply**

Applications are currently being accepted for the 2013 Master Gardener training program. You can download an application at <http://skagit.wsu.edu/mg/> or request an application be mailed to you by calling the WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270, ext. 0. Applications must be received by October 30, 2012. Qualifying applicants will be contacted in November to begin the interview and screening process.

If you are passionate about gardening, learning and teaching, we hope you'll consider applying to become a master gardener. We guarantee that getting dirty, sweaty, stiff and sore has never been more fun!