

Ask a Master Gardener

Timely insights on relevant topics from our area's home gardening experts



Statewide WSU Extension Master Gardener Program Celebrates 50 Years

Cultivating Plants, People, and Communities Since 1973

By Deborah Smeltzer, Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener

2023 marks the 50th Anniversary of the WSU Extension Master Gardener (EMG) Program in Washington state, the first in the United States. The program began in 1973 in Pierce and King counties with the first class of more than 300 Master Gardener students. Snohomish and Spokane counties followed with their first classes in 1974. Skagit County had its first WSU Extension Master Gardener volunteer in 1977. Now 50 years later in 2023, the Extension Master Gardener Program in Washington has more than 4,000 volunteers and the U.S. has more than 100,000 volunteers. The program has also spread to eight provinces in Canada.

The WSU Extension Master Gardener Program originated as a result of the green revolution that exploded in the U.S. in the 1970s. Extension agents at land grant colleges, those charged with the mission of supporting farmers with research about agricultural practices and production needs, were overwhelmed with the influx of questions from home gardeners about plants and plant problems. Two extension agents in King and Pierce counties, David Gibby and Bill Scheer, assigned to support

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both home gardeners and commercial horticulture producers, came up with the idea to train volunteers to support home gardeners via plant clinics and educational activities. They would teach the volunteers to be community educators to help home gardeners with their questions about plants, cultural practices, and problems from pests and diseases.

Gibby and Scheer organized the first plant clinic at the Tacoma Mall in 1972 and dubbed the project the "Master Gardener Program," named in recognition of the highly trained horticulturists called "Gartenmeisters" that Gibby had encountered in Germany. Also in 1972, Steve Lorton, then editor at Sunset Magazine, wrote an article to help recruit volunteers to be trained as plant diagnosticians. The rest is history (see <https://mastergardener.wsu.edu/who-we-are/50-years/>).



Left: Local news media interview King and Pierce County extension agents David Gibby and Bill Scheer about their new program to train volunteers, who would then extend that knowledge to the public. **Center:** Sunset Magazine (1972) ran an article recruiting Master Gardeners for the WSU Extension program. **Right:** Extension staff answering questions at 1973 plant clinic at the Tacoma Mall.

Under the leadership of WSU EMG Statewide Program Leader Jennifer Marquis, plans for the 50th Anniversary Celebration (see: <https://mastergardener.wsu.edu/who-we-are/50-years/>) have been underway since July 2021. A group of five Master Gardeners from across the state have guided the planning for four regional events and a commemorative magazine. In Skagit County, Master Gardeners Deborah Smeltzer and Lin Hoisington have worked extensively on the state-wide project.



Left: Jennifer Marquis presenting at Puyallup 50th Anniversary event on April 8, 2023 Photo by Deborah Smeltze .r
Right: 50th Anniversary Commemorative Magazines will be on sale during the Open House

The communications team of WSU College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences (CAHNRS) developed an extensive media toolkit for volunteer use along with three videos (past, present, and future of the program) that have been rolled out this spring and summer.

The videos have great drone video coverage of the Skagit County Discovery Garden (located at WSU NWREC in Mount Vernon) and Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardeners at work. A fourth composite 50th Anniversary video will be presented at the annual Master Gardeners' Advanced Education Conference in September.

A special initiative of the 50th Anniversary planning has been the launch of a 5-year campaign to raise \$1.5 million to support the establishment of the first-ever, fully dedicated WSU Extension Master Gardener Program Endowed Faculty Chair. The WSU College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences development team is leading the fundraising effort. The endowed chair campaign was a key focus of the one-day CougsGive fundraiser in April 2023. By early June, more than \$71,000 had been contributed to the campaign. The Master Gardener Foundation of Washington State (MGFWS) has also committed funds to this campaign.

The four regional events are showcased on the statewide program webpage, highlight different themes, and are a prelude to the 2023 Advanced Education Conference (AEC) to be held in Tacoma:

- April 8, 2023 – Puyallup at WSU Puyallup Research and Extension Center
- May 20, 2023 – Prosser at Irrigated Agriculture Research and Extension Center (IAREC)
- June 10, 2023 – Wenatchee at Tree Fruit Research and Extension Center (TFREC)
- July 13, 2023 – Mount Vernon at Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center (NWREC)
- Sep 27-30, 2023 – Tacoma, 2023 Advance Education Conference hosted by the Master Gardener Foundation of Washington State Learn more at: <https://mglearns.mastergardenerfoundation.org/>

The second regional celebration was held on May 20th in Prosser. At this event, Jennifer Marquis announced a challenge match of \$15,000 provided by Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener Deborah Smeltzer and her husband, David Kingsbury. Deborah and David are matching dollar-for-dollar up to \$15,000 any contributions to the endowed Master Gardener chair campaign in the form of cash or pledge donations through September 2023. They strongly support the mission of the endowed Master Gardener faculty chair to:

- Teach Master Gardeners cutting-edge horticulture and environmental stewardship in perpetuity
- Create tools that support volunteer outreach such as publications and fact sheets
- Partner and collaborate with like-minded organizations to leverage program strengths
- Build robust curricula that addresses difficult societal challenges

This endowment will be a game changer to provide key resources to Master Gardeners in perpetuity and to help home gardeners benefit from plant clinics, lectures, demonstration gardens, and many other educational activities in horticulture and environmental stewardship that Master Gardeners

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provide. Donations to this campaign by both Master Gardeners and home gardeners will help demonstrate the value of a dedicated Master Gardener faculty chair to Skagit County and the entire state of Washington. Please consider joining Deborah and David to help support the campaign during this important 50th Anniversary year. It would be a great accomplishment to push the WSU EMG Program endowed faculty chair campaign beyond \$100,000 before the state-wide Advanced Education Conference to be held in September.

Join us for the regional 50th Anniversary Celebration
Thursday, July 13, 2023
WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center
16650 State Route 536, Mount Vernon

Watch this website to register for the regional 50th Anniversary Celebration held in Mount Vernon at the WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center on Thursday, July 13, 2023. Co-hosted by Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardeners and WSU NWREC, event registration is open to the public. Master Gardeners in neighboring Clallam, Island, Jefferson, King, San Juan, and Whatcom Counties are all invited to participate. Beginning at 10 a.m. in the Sakuma Auditorium, the free event will include a short program featuring special guests including WSU Associate Dean and Director of Extension Vicki McCracken.

The event continues through noon with an open house at WSU NWREC and the three onsite demonstration gardens. Each participating county as well as the statewide Extension Master Gardener program and the endowment team will have tables/canopies set-up to share their work. Commemorative Magazines celebrating the 50th anniversary will be sold at the event.

A key part of the celebration is the opportunity to visit the three gardens adjacent to WSU NWREC; the Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener Discovery Garden, the Salal Native Plant Society (NPS) Garden, and the Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation (NW Fruit) Garden. These three gardens are a vivid and moving display of both native and climate appropriate plants providing new and experienced gardeners inspiration and evolving ideas about sustainable gardening practices.

The theme of this 50th Anniversary celebration is partnering between WSU Extension Master Gardeners, WSU faculty and staff, and community partners. Together we can support Healthy People and a Healthy Planet. Please come help us celebrate!

RESOURCES:

- WSU Extension Master Gardener 50th Anniversary Edition (commemorative magazine, published April 2023)
- WSU EMG Program Statewide website - <https://mastergardener.wsu.edu/>
- Skagit County Master Gardener Foundation website - <https://www.skagitmg.org/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Deborah Smeltzer has been a Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener (EMG) since 2012. She currently serves as president-elect of the Skagit County Master Gardener Foundation board and as chair of the Skagit County WSU EMG Program Training Team. In 2020, Deborah was named Washington State Master Gardener of the Year by the Master Gardener Foundation of Washington State.

Questions about home gardening or becoming a Master Gardener may be directed to: Skagit County WSU Extension Office, 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, Burlington, WA 98233; by phone: 360-428-4270; or via the website: www.skagit.wsu.edu/mg