The Transition from State to Local Funding for Virginia Master Gardener Volunteer Management

Sheri Dorn¹ and Paula Diane Relf²

ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS. **leadership development, extension**

SUMMARY. Management changes brought about by 1996 budgetary action shifted local Master Gardener (MG) program management from state-funded local agents to a structure of coordinators consisting of locally funded agents, locally funded nonagent coordinators, and volunteers willing to take on additional responsibilities. The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) MG volunteer program is currently available in 76 unit offices. The unit programs are managed by 46 MG coordinators, including 8 locally funded agents, 8 locally funded technicians, and 30 volunteers. Currently, there are 2747 MG volunteers (trainees, interns, and MGs). To provide consistent, state-level direction and leadership to this less experienced group of local coordinators and to prepare them for their jobs as MG program managers, current management materials were extensively revised and expanded and new resources were developed. These efforts to ensure that everyone understood the purpose and focus of the VCE MG program resulted in revision of MG program policies, development of new volunteer training materials, establishment of a state-level MG planning and work team, new management guidelines, in-service training for coordinators, an administrative website and electronic discussion listserv available only internally to agents and coordinators, and a state MG newsletter focused on the role of MGs as community leaders and educators.

Since its inception in 1972 by Washington State University Cooperative Extension, the Master Gardener (MG) program has spread to more than 45 states and Canadian provinces (Price, 1997). MG programs are managed in a variety of ways. Most states, like Pennsylvania and Florida, have evolved an organizational structure that involves the state extension horticulture specialist, a state coordinator, and a series of local program managers, typically horticulture agents. Other state MG programs consist of one or more counties within a state that are managed by the local extension agent and are operated independently (J. Bradshaw, unpublished).

The cost of publishing this paper was defrayed in part by the payment of page charges. Under postal regulations, this paper therefore must be hereby marked *advertisement* solely to indicate this fact.

¹Former research associate, Department of Horticulture, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Mail Code 0327, Blacksburg, VA 24061.

²Professor, Department of Horticulture, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Mail Code 0327, Blacksburg, VA 24061.

Changes in Virginia MG management, 1996

Before 1996, Virginia MG program management was very similar to others reported in Bradshaw's survey (1997). A state extension specialist and paid state coordinator provided support (largely resource materials) to local extension agents who managed the MG programs with a degree of autonomy. Most states recognize that individual county or unit MG programs need "latitude to design programs to meet their specific needs" (Ruppert et al., 1997). This leads to a certain degree of autonomy at the local level, although "state leadership is necessary to provide continuity, communication, and resource maximization" (Ruppert et al., 1997). Before in Virginia, state-funded extension agents, primarily consumer horticulture agents but also some agriculture and 4-H agents, entirely managed local MG programs or delegated responsibilities to established MGs. Often, MG volunteer managers did not have clear knowledge of VCE's educational mission, the role of the extension agent, or of their purpose as volunteers recruited to assist VCE meet its goals.

Major MG program management changes were brought about in 1996 by state budgetary action. In an e-mail memo from then-associate director of agriculture and Natural Resources (Jones, 1996), it was stated that "in response to guidelines and guidance from the Executive Branch, VCE has developed a plan to eliminate the use of state funds to support the MG program, effective 1 July 1996." It was stated that "VCE will continue to use the experience and expertise of MGs to provide appropriate educational programs to their communities ... (however) The training and management of MG volunteers cannot be conducted by VCE staff funded with state tax dollars" (Jones, 1996). Therefore, in 1996, all MG management shifted to a structure of local MG coordinators consisting of locally funded agents, locally funded nonagent coordinators, or volunteers willing to take on additional responsibilities.

Although specific reasons for these changes were not given, several issues have been attributed to the 1996 budgetary action. In Virginia, as in other states, legislators, the public, and some agents had become confused as to

whether or not MG volunteers are extension clientele. In some cases, agents with MG management responsibilities had focused a significant amount of their efforts on this select group of people without related educational programming being implemented in the community. Some agents, sharing Florida's sentiments that "the volunteers are customers of and very visible ambassadors for (extension)" (Ruppert et al., 1997), had taken efforts to satisfy this vocal group that had a history of influencing budget decisions. Any individual who applied to the program had been accepted, trained, and provided with continued education and one-on-one information regardless of whether or not they could or would volunteer for extension. The quantity of warm bodies in training classes had become far more important in some local programs than the quality of the volunteer and their willingness and ability to further VCE's mission. In some cases, MG volunteers required so much of the agent's time that inadequate time was available for designing programs with community impact for MGs to implement.

Additionally, confusion had developed over the role of the MG volunteer. Through the years, the role of the MG volunteer has changed from "answer(ing) repetitive, easily answered questions by phone or in person" to "involvement in proactive and community-oriented ventures" (Ruppert et al., 1997). In many cases, effective educational programs for the community have resulted. However, increased liberties with volunteer jobs has resulted in MGs in some offices volunteering in jobs outside of extension's education mission, such as becoming free garden labor. With volunteer jobs shifting away from VCE's educational mission, the expected programmatic return for VCE was not always satisfactory. Bobbitt (1997) pointed out that the MG program must express a clear mission of education. "MGs are trained to be grassroots educators," serving many diverse audiences, and relating to "the larger issues facing society—environmental quality, crime prevention, food security, strong neighborhoods, and healthy, capable children." Without this purpose driving the MG program, the program would "be viewed as little more than a glorified garden club and not worthy of support" (Bobbitt, 1997).

The 1996 budgetary events provided the opportunity to bring statewide focus to the purpose of the VCE MG program. The Office of Environmental Horticulture (OEH), directed by the state extension Environmental Horticulture specialist and housing the state MG coordinator and other staff, took leadership in redirecting the MG program. New program directions focused on developing MG volunteers as educational partners with and nonpaid staff of VCE. Emphasis was placed on the role of MGs as volunteer educators whose purpose was to conduct VCE-sponsored educational programs for their local communities. It was further emphasized that the VCE MG program's purpose was not to provide in-depth horticultural education for gardeners who simply wanted the extensive education given to MG volunteers.

The restructuring based on local MG coordinators was confusing for volunteer and paid staff alike. Coordinators needed information, guidance, and suggestions for meeting their new management responsibilities. Sixty-five percent of local coordinators were MG volunteers, most of whom had neither knowledge of managing a volunteer program, nor clear understanding of VCE and the appropriate educational role of MG volunteers. They were familiar with the MG training program from the volunteer perspective, but had no experience managing the program or teaching MG volunteers how to implement VCE public educational programs for the community.

Misunderstanding by agents and VCE administration regarding guidelines and guidance from the Executive Branch created a shift in extension agents' attitudes. Some agents who worked closely with MG programs prior to the 1996 changes were suddenly unwilling to talk to MG volunteers or to involve MG volunteers in public education program implementation, the latter of which was acknowledged and encouraged by the VCE director throughout the 1996 transition. The Office of Environmental Horticulture led efforts to reduce misunderstanding by preparing the new local coordinators for their jobs as MG program managers and ensuring that everyone, including volunteers and paid VCE staff, understood the purpose and focus of the VCE MG program. Efforts directed at reducing this misunderstanding included the revi-

Table 1. A listing of chapter titles for the 1998 VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual (Dorn and Relf, 1998b).

Chapter	Title
1	The local MG coordinator
2	Virginia Tech affiliation
3	Getting started for the first time
4	Designing and implementing educational programs
5	VCE publication 426-699, Welcome to Virginia Master Gardening!
6	Establishing responsibilities of Master Gardeners
7	Developing skills and knowledge
8	Recruiting and selecting prospective VCE Master gardeners
9	Training: Preparing VCE MGs for their jobs
10	Ensuring continued growth
11	Promoting VCE MG programs
12	Managing resources
13	Evaluating the MG program
14	Recordkeeping and reporting

sion of MG program policies, development of new volunteer materials, establishment of a MG team, new management guidelines, in-service training for coordinators, an administrative Website, an electronic discussion list for coordinators, a refocused state MG newsletter, and training sessions with VCE administrators and district and unit directors.

New VCE MG program policies

The management changes required a formal set of VCE MG program policies to be applied throughout the state with oversight from the state MG coordinator and state extension specialist. Before 1996, policies were developed and mutually agreed upon by agents, but had no university or VCE administrative approval, and thus lacked authority for compliance with the exception of the pesticide policy issued by the university's Chemical, Drug, and Pesticide Unit. Because extension agents function with a great degree of autonomy in their unit offices, the authority for local MG program management needed to be transitioned to the new system of local MG coordinators. Receiving VCE administrative approval for the revised VCE MG program policies (Dorn and Relf, 1997) was the first step in providing authority to the new coordinators of Virginia MG programs. This administrative approval and coordinator authority was necessary to assure effective training and direction to an acknowledged valuable group of volunteers and to maintain the volunteers' tie to VCE and the local office. The revised policies included existing policies

(Schwab and Relf, 1989) that were expanded to address additional issues. In a series of meetings in November 1996, coordinators (agents, nonagents, and volunteers) were invited to review the proposed policies and make additional suggestions for revision. The new policies were completed, reviewed, and approved by VCE administration in February 1997. These new policies set forth minimum standards and protocol for recruitment, training, volunteer time, MG volunteer projects, and related topics.

Changes in the program direction and policies required informing and educating all MG volunteers and VCE staff across the state regarding the new standards. Revised materials about being a VCE MG volunteer were developed from prior publications (Schwab and Relf, 1989; Relf, 1994) and the new VCE MG program policies. These revised materials, entitled *Welcome to Virginia Master Gardening!* (VCE publication 426-699; Dorn and Relf, 1998a), were then printed as part of the *Virginia Master Gardener Handbook* (Relf, 1994). These revised volunteer materials were first distributed in draft form to local coordinators in August 1997 for local production and distribution. VCE publication #426-699 was printed in January 1998 and all VCE MGs trained in January 1998 or later received copies of the information in their training handbook.

The MG team

A problem-solving and planning team, referred to as the MG Team, was also developed in 1997. This team was

originally created to work with the state MG coordinator in identifying and resolving the problems resulting from the 1996 shift in management. In its first year, the team was instrumental in initiating the VCE MG administrative Website, contributing to the development of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* (Dorn and Relf, 1998b), and planning MG College, a special advanced-training opportunity extended to active VCE MGs held annually on the campus of Virginia Tech. More recently, the team has addressed risk management issues facing MG programs by developing two training slide sets for coordinators (Reilly and Carter, 1998a, 1998b); volunteer recognition tools, such as VCE nametags and service awards; and educational programming across VCE program areas, such as 4-H and family and consumer sciences (FCS). The MG team continues on a year-to-year basis, identifying new individuals who will bring unique and valuable perspectives to the team's discussions. Team representatives include locally funded agents, state-funded agents (environmental horticulture, 4-H, and FCS), locally funded nonagent coordinators, volunteer coordinators, MG volunteers, and representatives of the Virginia Master Gardener Association (VMGA).

New management guidelines

A new management guide, the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* (Dorn and Relf, 1998b), was developed cooperatively with teams of MG volunteers, local coordinators, agents, and paid VCE staff to build structure and uniformity in MG program management across the state of Virginia and to enhance the effectiveness of the local coordinator. The management topics identified by this group ranged from recruiting for predetermined job descriptions to recognition procedures for volunteers. Contemporary volunteer management topics were researched to provide the basis for the new management guide. Local MG programs were asked for samples of letters, tests, training outlines, and procedures that were used to manage their MG programs for inclusion in the coordinator's manual. The MG Team reviewed the existing management guide, the volunteer chapter in the *Virginia Master Gardener Handbook*

Table 2. Local Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener coordinators' evaluation of available management tools for assisting and directing volunteer program management.

Tool	N ^z	Useful (%) ^y
Manual	39	92.3
Training	35	80.0
Consultation	33	78.8
Website	34	55.9

^zN represents the number of responses to the particular question. The changes in N reflect those respondents who selected not to answer the question.

^yIndividuals responded to a scale of 1 to 4, with two answers representing acceptable levels and two not acceptable levels. Percent usefulness was determined by adding the frequency percentages of the two acceptable levels.

(Relf, 1994), and an outline for MG program policies and guidelines that were developed in 1993 by a team of 12 agents, volunteers, and state-level staff. Pertinent information served as the basis for development and new sections were added to reflect the current management situation. To provide coordinators with a clear understanding and the information to train MG volunteers, new management guidelines fully explained the mission of VCE, its Environmental Horticulture Plan of Work and related importance of record keeping and reporting, and the role of the extension agent and the local MG coordinator. As the manual was developed, sections were reviewed by the MG team for applicability. A 14-chapter draft version was completed in March 1998 (Table 1).

Inservice for training local coordinators

Local MG coordinator training sessions are conducted annually to review MG program management. The MG Team helped to make the decision that coordinator training will be held annually in June, just before MG College. Because the majority of coordinators are volunteer positions that experience yearly turnover through reelection, it is necessary to have an annual training event to familiarize these individuals with their jobs and the resources available to assist them. The MG Team advised that June was an appropriate time for the training, as most local officer elections occurred in the spring and new coordinators would be in place to participate in a June training. Other regional training op-

portunities are offered as need arises.

VCE-MG program administrative Website

An administrative Website on the VCE Intranet (nonpublic domain) was developed for use by local coordinators and VCE administrators. The Website includes current VCE MG program policies; educational resources, such as lists of slide sets, video tapes, and publications, that can be used to train MGs and educate the general public; a calendar of events reflecting possible recertification training opportunities for MG volunteers; frequently asked management questions and their answers; past issues of the *Virginia Master Gardener Leadership Development Newsletter*; and other timely pieces of information, such as conference registration announcements and forms, teaching tools, and articles.

VCE-MGC coordinator Listserv

To facilitate direct communication between the state and local MG coordinators, an electronic discussion list, a listserv, was instituted with sign-on controlled by the state MG coordinator. Coordinator's personal or unit office e-mail addresses are subscribed to the list, which is updated as coordinator changes occur. The state coordinator uses the list to send information in a timely manner, such as recertification training opportunities; grant applications; or reminder of management tasks, such as submitting MG service awards.

The state MG newsletter message

To reinforce the change in expectations of MGs, the statewide newsletter for MG volunteers, the *Virginia Master Gardener Leadership Development Newsletter*, edited by the state MG coordinator, was refocused on topics that developed leadership skills in its readers. Past issues of the newsletter were used as recognition tools, praising individuals for accomplishments. Since 1996, the newsletter has focused on the role of MG volunteers in leading educational programs in Virginia communities. It regularly includes resources available for MGs to do their jobs, such as grants, publications, and web sites; examples of edu-

cational programs currently conducted by VCE MGs; program administrative information, such as planning for the Advanced MG Stewardship series; and a calendar of events that lists recertification training opportunities. Each individual who trains as a VCE MG receives a complimentary subscription to the newsletter as long as the individual remains an active MG.

Tools to train MG volunteers

Tools to train MG volunteers are available to local coordinators. The *Virginia Master Gardener Handbook* is the base text for initial training, covering 16 horticulture topics and volunteerism. Slide sets and video tapes are available on loan to supplement the training manual. Opportunities to support retention of volunteers include MG College, advanced training offered annually at the university; the Advanced Master Gardener Stewardship series, such as Master Gardener—Tree Steward (Day et al., 1996) and Master Gardener—Water Steward (Dorn et al., 1997); and regional training supported by the Office of Environmental Horticulture.

Future management tools

Additional support for local MG program management is under development. An Internet-based record keeping and reporting system, designed by a special project team of agents, volunteers, and the state MG coordinator, is being developed. The new system will facilitate record keeping for individual volunteers as well as MG projects, reinforce the connection of MG projects to VCE's Environmental Horticulture Plan of Work, and place responsibility on VCE agents to incorporate MG accomplishments in VCE's annual reports.

The MG Team has identified the need for tools to enable the MG coordinators to more effectively train MGs on how to implement educational programs. Providing subject matter training is only the first step in allowing MGs to carry educational programs to the public.

Evaluation of management tools

In an evaluation survey, respondents ranked the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual* as the most

helpful tool in restructuring the local MG program, followed in order of helpfulness by MG coordinator training sessions, follow-up consultation with the state MG coordinator and/or state extension specialist, and finally the VCE MG administrative World Wide Web (Web) site (Table 2). These results are as expected, as the manual is a hands-on reference that is always available for immediate consultation. Not all individuals evaluating the manual (i.e., those who have started a brand new MG program since 1 July 1998) have participated in a coordinator training session. Also, the Web site is not as popular a resource because all coordinators are not Internet users and because the site does not contain as much information or implementation examples as the manual. While consultation with the state coordinator is an option for many coordinators, it is sometimes difficult to schedule a consultation. Additionally, this type of appointment lacks the benefit of interaction with other coordinators that comes with group trainings.

Conclusions

In 1996, there were 2500 active MG volunteers in 39 MG programs spread throughout 67 of 107 unit offices in Virginia. Even with a major shift in management that occurred in 1996, the VCE MG program continues to grow. In 1999, there are 2700 MG volunteers in 45 MG programs

spread through 76 of 107 VCE unit offices.

The VCE MG Web page, *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*, the MG Team, the refocused *Virginia Master Gardener Leadership Development Newsletter*, and additional MG management training tools were developed to assist and support a structured program management approach that focuses on local MG coordinators and their relationship to VCE staff, agents, and specialists, and the overall health of the VCE MG program. Future focus will address the role of MG volunteers as trainers and assist local coordinators in training MGs to implement educational programs in cooperation with all VCE agents.

Literature cited

- Bobbitt, V. 1997. The Washington State University Master Gardener program: Cultivating plants, people, and communities for 25 years. *HortTechnology* 7:345-347.
- Bradshaw, J. 1997. State Master Gardener program review. Unpublished data presented at the 5th Annu. Intl. Master Gardener Conf., Sacramento, Calif.
- Day, S.D., S.T. Dorn, P.D. Relf, and J.R. Harris. 1996. Master Gardener—Tree Stewards: Advanced training to enhance community volunteerism. *HortScience* 31(4):595.
- Dorn, S.T., M.T. Aveni, and P.D. Relf. 1997. Master Gardener—Water Stewards: Advanced training to enhance community involvement. *HortScience* 32(3):492.
- Dorn, S. and P.D. Relf. 1998a. Welcome to Virginia Master gardening! Guide to educational programming and resource and reference guide. VCE Publ. 426-699. Va. Coop. Ext., Blacksburg.
- Dorn, S. and P.D. Relf. 1998b. VCE Master Gardener coordinator manual. Va. Coop. Ext., Blacksburg.
- Jones, G.M. (gmjones@vt.edu). 2 Oct 1996. "Master Gardener coordination and consumer horticulture." E-mail to extension agents and administration.
- Price, M.S. 1997. Master Gardeners International Corporation—A success story. *HortTechnology* 7:336-338.
- Reilly, P. and D. Carter. 1998a. Risk management training for VCE MGs. Va. Coop. Ext., Blacksburg.
- Reilly, P. and D. Carter. 1998b. 4-H leadership training for VCE MGs. Va. Coop. Ext., Blacksburg.
- Relf, D. (ed.) 1994. Virginia Master Gardener handbook. Blacksburg, Va.
- Ruppert, K.C., J. Bradshaw, and A.Z. Stewart. 1997. The Florida Master Gardener program: History, use, and trends. *HortTechnology* 7:348-353.
- Schwab, J.L. and P.D. Relf. 1989. The Virginia Master Gardener management guide. Va. Coop. Ext. Publ. 426-700, Blacksburg.
- Dorn, S. and Relf, P.D. (eds.). 1997. VCE MG Program Policies. Va. Coop. Ext., Blacksburg.