Profile of an Active Master Gardener Chapter

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SUMMARY. The Bexar County (Texas) Master Gardeners (BCMGS) performed >33,000 hours of volunteer service in 1995 and again in 1996. In 1996 they raised \$218,094 and spent \$260,112 to operate ≈100 projects. MGs in partnership with the extension service can address priority issues within a community. They can provide the volunteer time, horticulture knowledge, and other skills such as problem solving and organizing abilities that attract partners, funds, and media coverage. Candidates for MG service in Bexar County heard about the BCMGS primarily from newspapers and word of mouth. MGs who stay active do so for the same reasons that they seek MG status: they want access to good horticultural information, they want to use their knowledge time on meaningful, fun projects, and they want to perform service with other gardeners.

The Bexar County (Texas) Master Gardener (BCMGS) group is an active group of volunteers that has grown quickly since its first class in 1990. In 1995, 315 volunteers performed 33,597 hours of documented service, and, in 1996, 248 volunteers recorded 34,219 hours on ≈100 different projects in youth gardening, environmental, consumer education, and administrative categories.

Projects include the typical MG efforts such as speakers bureau, homeowner phones, information booths, and variety trials (Relf et al., 1990; Welsh, 1996). The stable of projects, however, also includes some unique programs such as the award-winning Green Brigade, a learn, earn, and restitution project for juvenile offenders (Finch, 1995), and the WaterSaver Rebate program (Bohne, 1996). The rebate program is financed by the San Antonio Water System and managed by MGs. Components include reviewing landscape plans, offering public programs, counseling homeowners, and inspecting completed landscapes. Other unusual programs conducted by or participated in by the BCMGS include household hazardous waste collection, urban tree planting, *San Antonio Gardener* newsletter, xeriscape contest, and the user fee-funded Classroom Garden program (Alexander et al., 1995).

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The BCMG Executive Committee meets twice a month to review proposals for acceptance as MG projects. They are proposed by extension service staff, MG members, and potential partners from the community. The presentations are rarely written and usually do not include job descriptions.

The MG leadership can actively embrace a project, thereby taking responsibility for recruiting a project chairperson and fulfilling the goals as described. A second level of approval is more passive whereby they authorize MG hours to be granted but leave the organization to the project proposer. Project proposals may be rejected due to lack of available resources or if the project largely seeks maintenance workers.

MG leadership seeks to have a diverse set of volunteer opportunities available. Dig-in-the-dirt, teaching, and management opportunities are encouraged so there is something for every volunteer no matter what his preferences. The leadership also seeks to have more volunteer opportunities available than there are volunteers to fill the jobs. The idea is that, under such a system, there is competition among projects for help and every volunteer is valuable. Project chairs have to be imaginative and resourceful in using their team. Projects that do not attract volunteers are discarded in favor of more popular projects.

BCMGs receive 56 hours of horticultural, environmental, and volunteer service training in the basic training course. It is offered two times a year during the day on a weekday. Special class offerings are made in target neighborhoods. Typically 12 hours of

the training is provided by extension specialists (professors), 12 hours by the cooperative extension agent horticulturists or horticulture associates, 12 hours by MGs and the remaining 20 hours by other experts from the community.

MG volunteers act as monitors who organize the class, arrange for speakers, and select the leadership exercises offered (introduction exercises, outside volunteer services required during the class, volunteer service charts, committee chair presentations, table spokespersons, lunch arrangements, class member presentations, plant exchange, yard tours, etc.). The monitors have changed seven times during BCMG history.

There are about three applicants for each training slot for the regular classes; however, most applicants are accepted for the classes in targeted neighborhoods. A MG team selects candidates based on the hours of volunteer commitment, interest in targeted projects, address from a targeted neighborhood, recommendations from currently active MGs, needed skills such as graphic arts, computer, and carpentry, and a history of volunteer service. The desired skills are determined by the Executive Committee before each class and a screening form is to select new candidates.

The availability of a large number of volunteers willing to use organizational, horticultural, and other skills to address community priorities through educational programming has enabled the BCMG to attract financial partners of many types.

In 1996, \$218,094 in income passed

Fig. 1. Survey instrument.

Dear Bexar County Master Gardener:

The Bexar County Master Gardeners is an outstanding volunteer group. We constantly get asked why we are successful. Please complete the following short informational survey and return NOT LATER THAN 16 DEC. Rate the importance by applying a 5 to very important reasons, 3 to important reasons, and 1 to some consideration. Apply a 0 to reasons that played no part in your decision.

Why I applied for the Master Gardeners

- ☐ Horticulture information
- ☐ Opportunity for community service
- ☐ Interact with other gardeners
- ☐ Fill my spare time
- ☐ Personal recognition
- ☐ Organizational recognition
- ☐ Fun projects

Why I stay active in the Master Gardeners

- ☐ Horticulture information
- ☐ Opportunity for community service
- ☐ Interact with other gardeners
- ☐ Fill my spare time
- ☐ Personal recognition
- ☐ Organizational recognition
- ☐ Fun projects

How did you hear about the Bexar County Master Gardener organization?

☐ Friends	☐ One of the MG projects
☐ Newspaper	☐ Speaker at my organization
☐ Radio	☐ Other; What? _____
☐ San Antonio Gardener	

Table 1. Survey of Master Gardeners: Where I heard about Master Gardeners (multiple answers given).

Source	All who completed survey (n = 104)	Ethnic minorities who completed survey (n = 24)	Class 20 (new class 1997) (n = 35)	Those with >100 hours who completed survey (n = 49)
Newspapers	55	18	25	22
Friends	42	7	18	14
<i>San Antonio Gardener</i>	18	5	11	4
Radio	5	0	3	1
Master Gardener project	8	1	4	1
Speaker at organization	7	2	0	2
Other	8	1	2	3

through the BCMG accounts. It is estimated that an equal amount of material and in-kind donations were used (plant material for youth gardening, extension service staff, etc.). Income was derived from grants (52%), contracts (20%), fundraising events (9%), user fees (9%), sales of publications (9%), and donations (1%). Major funding sources in 1996 were the San Antonio Water System, U.S. Department of Defense, San Antonio Police Department, 17 different school districts, *San Antonio Gardener* newsletter, and the *Xeriscaping Conversion* handbook. The BCMG does not require dues from their members but there is a onetime training fee of \$75.

In the same year, expenses were \$260,112. The difference in income and expenses was provided by the For the Love of Kids and Harleys fund-raiser organized by area corporations to support the Green Brigade (Finch, 1994). Expenses were divided among youth gardening (31%), environmental (24%), consumer education (17%), volunteer support (16%), and administration (12%). Fifty-two percent of total costs were used for staffing.

Article VIII of the BCMGs bylaws states:

"The Executive Director, if appointed, is an employee of the Board and shall serve at

the pleasure of the Board of Directors. He/she shall be the Administrative Officer of the Corporation and perform such duties as directed by the Board. The Executive Director shall manage all operations of the corporation. The compensation of the Executive Director shall be determined by the Board of Directors. She/he shall hire, supervise and terminate other employees if there are any."

Article IX continues:

"The Bexar County Extension Agent (CEA-Hort) shall be an honorary Master Gardener and be an active, but nonvoting member of the Corporation, Board of Directors and Executive Committee. In the event the position of Executive Director is vacant, CEA-Hort shall on an advisory, voluntary and non-paid basis perform the duties envisioned for the Executive Director."

What this has meant is that the CEA-Hort is the negotiator of MG grants and contracts and he serves as chief spokesperson for the MGs. It is common for members of the BCMG Executive Committee to join the CEA-Hort in negotiations with partners and funding sources. The president of the MGs signs contracts and other agreements after they are reviewed and accepted by the Executive Committee (nonfinancial) or Board of Directors (financial or new policy). Each of

Table 2. Survey of Master Gardeners: Why I applied for the Master Gardener program.

Reason	All replying (n = 104)		Ethnic minority (n = 24)		Class 20 1997 (n = 35)		Those with ≥100 hours in 1996 (n = 49)	
	Total	Avg.	Total	Avg.	Total	Avg.	Total	Avg.
Horticultural information	475	4.56	108	4.50	164	4.69	235	4.80
Opportunity for community service	406	3.93	94	3.92	143	4.09	190	3.88
Interact with other gardeners	329	3.16	84	3.50	131	3.74	186	3.80
Fill my spare time	105	1.01	17	0.71	32	0.91	58	1.18
Personal recognition	51	0.49	7	0.29	16	0.45	27	0.55
Organization recognition	74	0.71	22	0.92	39	1.11	44	0.90
Fun projects	265	2.54	59	2.46	113	3.23	113	2.31
Other	97	0.93	28	1.17	34	0.97	20	0.41

Table 3. Survey of Master Gardeners: Why I continue as a Master Gardener.

Reason	All replying (n = 69)		Ethnic minority (n = 12)		Those with ≥100 hours (n = 49)	
	Score		Score			
	Total	Avg.	Total	Avg.	Total	Avg.
Horticultural information	311	4.51	49	4.08	228	4.65
Opportunity for community service	273	3.96	50	4.17	203	4.14
Interact with other gardeners	280	4.00	53	4.42	210	4.29
Fill my spare time	58	0.84	11	0.92	41	0.84
Personal recognition	40	0.58	2	0.17	22	0.44
Organization recognition	96	1.39	16	1.33	71	1.45
Fun projects	184	2.67	32	2.67	133	2.71
Other	83	1.20	15	1.25	35	0.71

the seven program areas—volunteer services, consumer education, water conservation, environmental issues, youth gardening, neighborhood gardens, and Green Brigade—has a half-time staff position that report to the horticultural associate (HA). The HA position has been funded by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service to assist the CEA-Hort since 1994. Most grant proposals are written either by the CEA-Hort or HA.

The staff positions may or may not be filled at any time depending on funds that are available in the various program areas. The staff positions are designed to back up MG committee chairs in organizing, funding, pro-

viding training for and staffing MG projects. MG paid staff concentrate their efforts on rebuilding volunteer project teams that are not functioning as expected due to loss of leadership or resources. A full-time MG-funded clerk typist and half-time bookkeeper assist the programmatic activities. They report to the HA for supervision.

There has been no detailed analysis of how the relationship between the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in Bexar County and the BCMG program is perceived by the San Antonio area public, but in a series of 61 articles collected in the last year concerning water conservation in area publications, 16

Table 4. Characteristics of the Bexar County Master Gardener (MG) membership 31 Dec. 1996 (n = 248).

Characteristic	Total membership (%)	Most active MGs (%) ^z
Gender		
Male	44	44
Female	56	56
Ethnic group		
American Indian	<1	1
Asian-Pacific Islands	1	2
Black	3	5
Hispanic	17	17
White	77	71
Age		
<25	3	0
25–34	17	1
35–44	33	23
45–54	20	32
55–64	17	26
65–74	9	13
≥75	2	5
Income of neighborhood ^y		
Upper	43	56
Middle	24	29
Moderate	23	12
Low	10	3

^zPercentage of individuals (99) who volunteered >100 hours of service in 1996.

^yBased on income levels of zip codes with average incomes of Upper = over \$36,000, Middle = \$24,001–\$36,000, Moderate = \$15,001–\$24,000, and Low = under \$15,000. Data provided by Frost Bank.

mentioned the MGs, 7 mentioned the extension service without the MGs, and 11 mentioned both organizations. The two organizations are close partners in water conservation programming.

The Texas Agricultural Extension Service rents one building and the BCMG rents two properties in San Antonio. Most MG staff are housed in the extension service offices. MG grant funds have purchased a video camera and several computers that are used in common, but most equipment and office supplies are supplied by the extension service. MG properties are used for storage and educational events.

The MGs, as are all master volunteers affiliated with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, are considered staff of the extension service (Welsh, 1996). When they are staffing extension service-sponsored activities, they are covered by the same liability coverage as extension service employees. Texas law also generally exempts volunteers of nonprofit corporations from nonnegligent liability (McCorkle, 1997). In the case of the BCMGs, the nonprofit corporation purchases liability insurance for its facilities and special events where extension service coverage is questionable or insufficient for the site owners.

Membership survey

In December 1996, a survey instrument

was included as part of the MG programmatic newsletter, the *Scion* (Fig. 1). The survey folded to a mailable document complete with the address of the extension service office. MGs had to stamp the letter themselves. Of the 248 active MGs, 69 returned completed surveys (27.8% response rate). The survey was also completed by all 35 class members on the first day of class, 8 Jan. 1997.

The survey was initiated to give the extension service staff and MG leadership information on the reasons why individuals seek to join the volunteer organization, why they stay active, and how they found out about the MG opportunity.

Individuals who responded to the survey rated the reasons for applying and staying active on a range of 0 to 5, with 5 being most important. The total score for each category was divided by the number who responded to get a rating for each reason. For the survey item, "how the membership heard about the BCMGs," they were asked only to check one or more sources of the information.

The results were organized by total individuals responding, ethnic minorities responding, Class 20 trainees, and by volunteers with >100 hours of service in 1996. Other characteristics of the Bexar County membership were analyzed by sorting members by gender, age group, neighborhood income, ethnic group, and class number in relationship to hours of service.

Table 5. Characteristics of Master Gardeners by training class.

Class no.	Trained (no.)	Active 31 Dec. 1996 (no.)	Still active (%)	Total hours	Avg. hours
1	29	13	45	2122	163.2
2 ^y	31	6	19	811	135.2
3	31	12	39	3958	329.8
4	35	6	17	534	89.0
5	29	7	24	1342	191.7
6	25	9	36	1523	169.2
7	25	7	28	821	117.3
8	28	19	68	4053	213.3
9	26	7	27	840	120.0
10	30	15	50	3428	228.5
11	29	18	62	2765	153.6
12	34	18	53	2225	123.6
13 ^y	32	18	56	1575	87.5
14	30	21	70	1992	94.9
15 ^x	36	29	81	3140	108.3
16 ^x	33	24	73	980	40.8
17 ^x	27	10	37	1051	105.1
18 ^{xw}	30	0	0	0	0
19 ^x	23	9	39	27	3.0
Total	563	248	43.36	33,160	133.7

^yThe remaining hours for 1996 (total 34,219) were not entered until after 31 Dec. 1996.

^ySaturday classes; all other classes met 1–5 PM during week.

^xGraduated in 1996 and did not have full year to serve initial 50 hours.

^wDepartment of Defense special class, volunteer service not required.

Results and discussion

The survey of MGs conducted in 1996 revealed that most MG applicants heard about the organization and classes through the newspaper (80%) and friends (61%) (Table 1). Ethnic minorities relied on the newspaper more (75%) than friends (29%) or all other sources (33%) (*San Antonio Gardener* newsletter, radio, TV, MG projects, speakers). The portion of the membership that replied to the survey and that put in >100 hours of service also relied on newspapers (45%) and friends (28%) to hear about the original MG training (Table 1). Members of the first class recruited in 1997 followed the pattern except for a greater awareness of the *San Antonio Gardener* newsletter, which is sent to ≈1000 subscribers in the San Antonio area.

BCMGs join the organization for access to horticultural information (4.56 of possible 5.0 score with 104 replying), opportunity for community service (3.93 score), and to interact with other gardeners (3.16 score) (Table 2). All other reasons scored at 2.54 or less. The scores for the newest MGs, MGs that are ethnic minorities, and MGs with >100 hours of service in 1996 followed the same pattern (Table 2).

BCMGs stay active for the same reasons they join the organization. MGs want continuing access to horticultural information, interaction with fellow gardeners, and meaningful community service (Table 3).

The typical MG in the Bexar County chapter is white, female, in the age group between 35 to 44, and resides in a moderate-income neighborhood (Table 4). The most active MGs, however, are likely to be older and reside in higher-income neighborhoods (Table 4).

As of 31 Dec. 1996, 19 classes have received MG training. An analysis of class performance showed extreme differences between classes (Table 5). The number of individuals still active in a particular class varied between 0% and 100% on 31 Dec. 1996 (Table 5). Some of this difference is readily explainable. The Department of Defense class (18) in 1996 involved attendees from military bases all over the southern United States. The candidates were selected by their super-

visors without having to commit to volunteer service. They were also required to obtain supplemental training and perform volunteer service on their own before they would be graduated as MG interns. As of 31 Dec. 1996, none had completed the special requirements.

One would expect some differences in involvement by classes over time. More MGs from earlier classes have died or become invalids and family, employment, and interests change, all factors that affect volunteer service. Also, classes graduated in 1996 would expect to have a high percentage of volunteers active but perhaps a low number of average hours of service because they had only part of the year to perform.

Other characteristics that may affect why classes perform differently in terms of volunteer services are the number of persons in the selection pool for a particular class, whether the class is held during working hours or on Saturdays, the type and number of leadership exercises used in the class, and the degree that volunteer services versus horticulture are emphasized by the class monitors. Difference in class performance is an obvious area where further study might reveal factors that result in more volunteer service.

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