



# Master Gardeners International Corporation—A Success Story

Mary S. Price<sup>1</sup>

---

**ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS.** extension

---

**SUMMARY.** Since its establishment in 1988, Master Gardeners International has served as a clearinghouse for the exchange of information about Master Gardening, providing support to Master Gardeners, cooperative extension, the gardening public, and the horticultural industry.

---

**A**ncedotal evidence is often cited as testimony to the growing popularity and success of Master Gardener (MG) programs. While this evidence is often very impressive and quite inspiring, it is also useful to be able to validate these narrative assumptions with some reliable statistics that have been gathered since 1991. Data for the earlier years are unavailable, but MG programs expanded quite dramatically from one county program in 1972 to more than 700 programs in 45 states and 4 Canadian provinces in 1991. By 1996, there were more than 1000 active training programs in operation in all 50 states plus 4 of the Canadian provinces [Master Gardeners International (MGI), 1991, 1996]. And while it is very difficult to determine the total number of individuals who have received this training, current estimates range anywhere from 30,000 to 60,000 people.

This growing popularity of MG programs in the United States and Canada led eventually to a need for an international forum to support the exchange of information among existing program participants and the compilation of data useful to new programs and the gardening public. Responding to these needs, MGI was established in 1988 as a follow-up to the first national MG conference held in Washington, D.C., in 1987. Originally MGI was known by the acronym MaGIC, but that evolved over the years to the shorter form. While this abbreviated form of the name has varied over time, the official name of the organization has remained the same.

---

<sup>1</sup>Executive director.

For more information about the activities, publications, and membership benefits, contact Master Gardeners International, P.O. Box 526, Falls Church VA 22040-0526; telephone 703.241.3769; fax 703.241.8625; e-mail mgic@capaccess.org.

## Establishment of MGI and the early years of the organization

MGI was incorporated as a nonprofit corporation in Virginia and subsequently was recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt educational organization under Code Section 501C(3). The organization has operated under bylaws that allowed for a self-governing board of directors to provide oversight for its communications and its educational, public service, and outreach functions. As is often the case in the MG environment, virtually all of the day-to-day activities and the administrative planning and oversight have been and continue to be performed by volunteers.

Since its founding in 1988, MGI's significant contributions have been financial contributions to some of the biennial MG conferences; a one-time grant to help support an exchange of community gardening information between the United States and Russia; the ongoing compilation, publication, and distribution of the *Directory of Master Gardener Programs in the United States and Canada*; the ongoing publication of the organization's newsletter (originally titled *The MaGIC Lantern* but now called the *Master Gardening Journal*); and its complimentary distribution to the more than 700 cooperative extension service agents who administer MG programs and all of the state and provincial MG coordinators.

In the fall of 1990, MGI convened an advisory committee to solicit suggestions with respect to organizational issues and future development. The committee was made up of individuals with extensive experience in the cooperative extension MG programs, the horticultural world, and nonprofit educational and communications organizations. They unanimously recommended that MGI's near-term efforts focus on defining its mission and goals, expanding its membership, increasing public awareness of MG programs and of MGI, and arranging for clerical and technical help. The advisory committee also felt strongly that these tasks should take precedence over any changes in organizational structure, and that future structural changes would probably flow from the mission statement and goals.

In 1991, as a result of proposals made at the International Master Gardener Conference in Detroit/Windsor, another group called the National Master Gardener Steering Committee began meeting to focus on conference planning and to serve as an agent of continuity between conference hosts. This committee later became an organization called Master Gardeners of North America (MAGNA). MGI discussed a range of pos-

sible cooperative ventures with MAGNA, including the idea of merging the two organizations. However, the disparate objectives of the two groups prevented joint action at that time. Instead, a decision was made to focus on fundamental issues of self-definition before embarking on new ventures.

Based on the recommendations of the advisory committee, the MGI board formulated the following mission and goals statement, taking into account 1) the resources, skills, and abilities currently available to the organization and 2) the needs and interests of MGs and extension service personnel as they have been expressed in various communications, including a membership survey conducted in 1992:

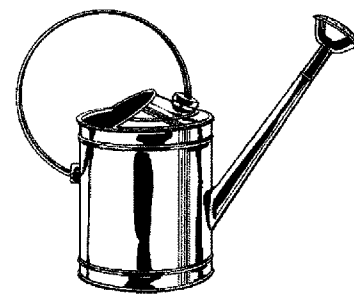
MGI is a nonprofit, charitable, educational and scientific organization established to support and promote MG programs by coordinating up-to-date information exchange, providing program support for MG activities, preparing and distributing specialized publications, and fostering interest in master gardening through media outreach.

This support is coordinated with local, state, and regional MG groups, the cooperative extension service, other national and international organizations, educational groups, and representatives of the horticultural industry.

## MGI: Serving MGs, agents, the gardening public, and the horticultural community

In 1994 MGI appointed a volunteer executive director to perform day-to-day management and technical and clerical tasks and to coordinate the growing volume of communications concerning membership, publications, and public relations. To encourage more comprehensive sharing of information, the organization's newsletter was remodeled and renamed *Master Gardening Journal*. Shortly thereafter, a publication program was launched to allow for the dissemination of more information in support of master gardening than was possible in the *Journal*. This publication program includes *Fact Sheets* (which address various aspects of the MG program), *Technical Bulletins* (on topics of horticultural interest), and a series of *Special Publications* (including the *1996 Directory of Master Gardener Programs in the United States and Canada*). At about the same time, MGI began to be known by its current acronym. This new abbreviation seemed less likely to produce confusion as to what it stood for (or to provoke amused comments).

Just whom does MGI serve? What services are available? Every week inquiries are





received from MGs, agents, the gardening public, and various components of the horticultural community. Agents and MGs are often interested in topics such as how to set up a 501(C)3 organization, advice on compiling bylaws for MG alumni groups, statistical data on the MG program (its history, how many active programs there are currently, etc.), how to establish a MG training program, tips on effective management of MG alumni organizations, and ideas for volunteer activities. Often these questions can be answered from information in the MGI files that have been developed over the years, while other times we offer to connect the individual with an agent or MG known to have experience in the topic that prompted the inquiry.

Responding to requests from the general gardening public regarding the location of MG programs in specific areas has become a daily activity. Hundreds of inquiries are received each year from individuals interested in becoming MGs. Often we are able to direct these individuals to nearby programs, but about one-third of the time there is either no program available or there is a long waiting list to get into the program. This is testimony to the growing popularity of MG programs and the need for adequate support for these programs.

Media outreach (including press releases, interviews, and frequent responses to requests for information about MG programs from publishers, authors, and radio and TV producers) has emerged as yet another regular MGI activity. This is also an area where we are sometimes able to provide the needed information but are equally likely to refer the publisher, author, or producer to appropriate state or provincial MG coordinators for reliable information about specific MG programs in North America. In connection with its clearinghouse function, MGI maintains and publishes an annotated bibliography (*Journal Articles about Master Gardening*),

which includes citations from 1986 to the present time and which serves to document the evolving story of master gardening as it appears in the periodical press.

A recent development is the formulation and construction of a national website for the MG program, which is being undertaken in cooperation with USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES). This international MG website contains information about the history of the program, how to locate a program in a specific community, a calendar of MG conferences and events, information about MG projects and volunteer activities, and other data pertinent to the management of and participation in MG programs.

## Conclusion

With a clearer understanding of what the organization is about (thanks to the recommendations of the advisory committee, many of which have now been realized) and with a firmer foundation in place as a result of the efforts of the past couple of years, MGI is exploring options for the future. Preliminary discussions with MAGNA representatives at the 1995 International Master Gardener Conference in Saskatoon revealed that the missions of the two organizations differed, but could and should comfortably coexist. It is expected that there will be further discussions resulting in an effective and harmonious arrangement whereby MG programs can receive the kind of support they need from both organizations. MGI approaches its 10th anniversary in 1998 with a strong commitment to supporting MGs, extension agents, and the horticultural community.

---

## Literature cited

Master Gardeners International. 1991, 1996. The directory of Master Gardener programs in the United States and Canada. MGI, Falls Church, Va.