

# The Washington State University Master Gardener Program: Cultivating Plants, People, and Communities for 25 Years

Van Bobbitt<sup>1</sup>

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**ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS.** volunteer, cooperative extension

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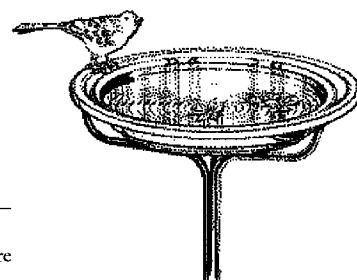
**SUMMARY.** After a quarter of a century, the Washington State University (WSU) Master Gardener (MG) program is a huge success. WSU and the citizens of Washington have been well served by MGs. In 1995, 2904 WSU MGs volunteered 101,335 hours and served >314,000 citizens. WSU's investment in MGs creates thousands of grassroots educators that leverage the resources of the university.

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It was 1972. A renewed interest in gardening was sweeping the country. College dorm rooms were sprouting house plants in macrame hangers. And the Master Gardener (MG) volunteer concept had germinated at Washington State University (WSU). David Gibby, an extension agent in the Seattle-Tacoma area in the early 1970s, claimed the MG program was conceived out of desperation. He often arrived at work to find 100 phone messages from home gardeners on top of an already full work load (S. Collman, personal communication).

To enable WSU Cooperative Extension to serve the vast numbers of home gardeners, Gibby, Arlen Davison, Bill Scheer, Bernard Wesenberg, and other WSU extension faculty began to discuss the idea of recruiting volunteers. The volunteers would receive intensive training from extension specialists. In return, they would help cooperative extension provide gardening information to the public.

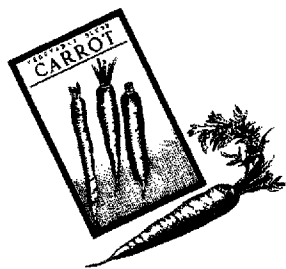
Much brainstorming and planning occurred during Spring and Summer 1972. The concept of holding garden clinics in public places—taking the extension office out to the people—was tested using extension agents to answer questions. The name Master Gardener was selected for the new program (Zuelow, 1989), and recruiting began when a two-page article in the September 1972 issue of *Sunset* magazine introduced the MG concept to the Puget Sound area (Whiting, 1976).



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<sup>1</sup>Community horticulture coordinator, Washington State University Cooperative Extension.

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Skeptics wondered if enough volunteers could be found to donate their time, but the response was tremendous (Whiting 1976). Davison recalls that  $\approx 300$  people applied for the first class, and 120 of those were selected to receive the 55 hours of training. In January 1973, the first MG training classes began in the Seattle-Tacoma-Everett metropolitan area. Later that year, another 50 MGs were trained in Spokane (S. Collman, personal communication; Zuelow, 1989).

Originally, MG programs were planned only for the larger urban counties, but the concept also proved attractive to smaller counties. MGs now serve 36 of Washington's 39 counties. Other states became interested, too. By 1976, MG programs had appeared in Colorado, Oregon, Montana, New York, Illinois, and Rhode Island (Master Gardener International Corp., 1991).

When the WSU MG program began, it focused on diagnosing plant problems and offering solutions. Sharon Collman, then an extension volunteer fresh out of graduate school, helped Gibby get the program up and running in 1973. She set up MG clinic locations, publicized the program, and kept records of volunteer activity.

"My volunteer job was a 40 to 50 hour work week with terrific people," Collman recalls. "Much of that time was spent on the road, going to the clinics, helping Master Gardeners learn as much as they could quickly, and supporting them emotionally. Many of the procedures that I set up for self-organization of each clinic are still being used."

Collman has been active in the MG program throughout its history. She was hired as an extension agent in 1974, retired from WSU in 1996, but continues to train MGs.

The program was a success from the start. MGs helped >7000 citizens that first year (Zuelow, 1989). Especially impressive was the volunteers' commitment to the program, with 75% of the first year's class returning for a second year of volunteering (S. Collman, personal communication). Collman attributes the MGs' dedication to WSU's commitment "to provide incentives, quality education, and support" for the volunteers.

Not only did MGs become more knowledgeable horticulturists, other aspects of their lives were also enhanced. In a 1981 survey of WSU MGs, most participants indicated improved self-worth, confidence, and decisionmaking abilities. "Half of the volunteers experienced increased interest in public affairs and personal development as a result of Master Gardener participation. Several respondents referred to Master Gardener participation as a challenging and rewarding experience. Some saw it as a good opportunity for retired persons to help in the

community... One commented, 'Master Gardeners may have saved my life from going down the tube'" (Brown-Piper, 1981).

Margaret Bonifaci has been an active MG since 1974 when she took a ferry from her home on Bainbridge Island to attend the training course in Seattle. When asked why she has stayed with the program all these years, she replied: "Camaraderie. Friends. Gardeners are nice people, and I like to go out, meet the public, and provide information." She also stated that the MG program has become more interesting over the years as it has diversified.

The MG program has been diversifying, as volunteers and extension staff find creative ways to address new challenges. MGs now design and present proactive educational programs that address critical issues such as water quality protection, safe pest management practices, yard waste management, native plant revegetation, and the welfare of youth, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities. For example

- King County MGs teamed up with the Washington Toxics Coalition and Seattle Tilth (an urban organic gardening organization) to offer the Green Gardening program. This program informs the public about sustainable gardening practices. MGs are trained to present integrated pest management (IPM) workshops, publications on environmentally sound pest management strategies have been developed, and Green Garden Tours attract >3500 citizens each summer. This program started in 1991 with a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and continues with financial support from Seattle.
- Spokane MGs participated in a Sustainable Landscaping project funded in 1994 by a Washington State Department of Ecology grant. They helped develop a xeriscaping curriculum, compile a database of native and drought-tolerant plants for landscaping, and teach workshops on the use of native trees in the landscape.
- Thurston County MGs received a grant from the Puget Sound Water Quality Authority in 1994 to launch a native plant salvage project. In cooperation with many community groups and businesses, they have salvaged thousands of native plants that would have been destroyed by development. The plants have been used for revegetation along streams and wetlands and for a native plant demonstration landscape. The group also produced a publication, *Grow Your Own Native Plant Landscape*.
- Through the Vegetable Kids project, MGs involve 40 Hispanic children from the Yakima Housing Authority in a summer-

long gardening effort. The project helps develop literacy skills, establish ethnic and intergenerational understanding, teach cooperation, and build self-esteem. When the harvest comes in, the children take a bag of produce and a bouquet of flowers home to their families each week.

- MGs in many counties are helping low-income families to grow more of their own food. This is especially important at a time when many anticipate reduced food-stamp benefits. Recently, 30 MGs and extension staff attended the "Growing Food in Communities" workshop and received special training to prepare them to work with low-income audiences. The goal is to promote greater food self-sufficiency.

Although WSU MGs are accomplishing great things, they cannot rest on their laurels. They face many challenges—tighter budgets, down-sized extension staffs, adopting new electronic technologies, greater scrutiny from elected officials, and competing interest groups. To survive and grow stronger, MGs must address the following:

**CLEAR PURPOSE.** As part of cooperative extension and the land-grant university, the MG mission is education. MGs are trained to be grassroots educators. When considering a new project, MGs must ask Is there a strong educational component to this project?

**SERVE DIVERSE AUDIENCES.** Our country's population has become more diverse in recent decades. MGs must serve various audiences, not just the relatively affluent middle class. The land-grant system was built on the principles that all people should have access to education and that universities "should serve the needs of the common person" (Entenmann, 1989). MGs should continue that tradition.

**ADDRESS CRITICAL ISSUES.** To be relevant to taxpayers, elected officials, and university administrators, master gardening must relate to the larger issues facing society—environmental quality, crime prevention, food security, strong neighborhoods, and healthy, capable children. Otherwise the MG program will be viewed as little more than a glorified garden club and not worthy of support.

**PUBLICIZE SUCCESSSES.** Cooperative extension and MGs are too modest. They must let citizens, lawmakers, businesses, and, last but not least, the university community know about the great work they do. These groups also must understand how their goals can be advanced through the work of MGs.

**EMPHASIZE QUALITY.** Cooperative extension must never sacrifice quality for quantity in its mass production of MGs. Quality must be reflected in the training and support MGs

receive as well as in the recruitment and selection process. After all, with MGs, cooperative extension is "hiring" volunteer staff that will represent the university and serve the public. Scheer, a recently retired WSU extension agent, recalls that the MG title was derived from Germany's gartenmeisters, who were highly respected horticulturists in their communities (B. Scheer, personal communication). That is the legacy to which cooperative extension and MGs must aspire.

So, after a quarter of a century, how is the WSU MG program doing? If imitation can be considered the sincerest form of flattery, it is a huge success. The MG program has spread to all 50 states and 4 Canadian provinces (M. Price, personal communication).

WSU and the citizens of Washington have been well served by MGs. In 1995, 2904 WSU MGs volunteered 101,335 hours and served >314,000 citizens. The time volunteered by MGs was equivalent to 48 full-time employees and valued at \$1,216,020 (Community Horticulture Team, 1996). WSU's investment in MGs creates thousands of grassroots educators that leverage the resources of the university. It extends the services of the university to all, while advancing the principle of true education—to teach people to think for themselves (Whiting, 1976).

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