

HISTORY OF THE MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM IN NEW CASTLE COUNTY

The Master Gardener Program, working through Cooperative Extension, is where avid gardener volunteers are given many hours of home horticulture training, and in return they 'repay' the local extension program through hours of volunteer service. Master gardeners assist with garden lectures, workshops, school and community programs, phone and sample diagnoses, and additional programs.

The Master Gardener Program was initiated in Washington State in 1972 when the Extension Agents became 'over loaded' with increasing questions from homeowners. A majority of the questions were seasonal and could easily be answered by someone with horticultural training. The program was started to train volunteers who could answer many of the questions from homeowners thus leaving the County agent free to support the commercial growers and answer the difficult homeowner questions. The Master Gardener program was established using some of the experiences of Extension Homemakers and the 4-H program, already a part of the Cooperative Extension. The experiment exceeded expectations and the Master Gardener Program was established. Today there are Master Gardener groups servicing all 50 states and Canada.

The New Castle County Master Gardeners were established in the spring of 1986 when Dr. Susan Barton coordinated the training of 15 enthusiastic volunteers. The following fall of 1986, Master Gardener training was held at Delaware State University for volunteers from Kent and Sussex counties. Initially they received 45 hours of training from the university staff, county agents and local experts in gardening. At the conclusion of training they were to 'repay' with 35 hours per year of service to the community through various programs.

Training over the years has increased to approximately 80 hours. The community service requirement grew to 40 hours for trainees during the first year, and then adjusted to 30 hours in the years that followed. Many of the volunteers exceed one hundred hours of service. Additionally each Master Gardener is required to accumulate at least 5 hours of advanced training each year.

As the years passed, training sessions were held each year until 1997 (with the exception of 1993). Starting in 1999 training classes were held every other year; odd years in New Castle County and even years in Kent and Sussex, if there was sufficient enrollment. Trainers include the county agent, University of Delaware and Delaware State University horticulture experts and previously trained master gardeners. Of the 350 New Castle County volunteers who have been trained, there are 110 on the 2010 rolls, including a 24 year veteran from the initial 1986 class.

In the early years some of the projects the New Castle Master Gardeners took on were:

- Educational displays
- Speaker's bureau
- Telephone and diagnostics
- Landscape projects
- Writing – news releases and fact sheets
- Horticultural therapy
- Radio and TV programs
- Workshops
- Demonstration gardens
- Community services

A sampling of a few specific projects is: answering questions at Wilmington Flower Day, telephone questions, cataloging the planting at The Methodist Country House, working in the Clark garden (later to become the University of Delaware Botanical Gardens). Additionally, Master Gardeners have provided advice, planning and 'hands on maintenance' at the Howard Pyle studios in Wilmington, Mt. Olive Cemetery, Old Swedes Church, Kamin Rest Home, Main Towers in Newark, and the Wilmington Western Railroad.

Also, the Master Gardeners answered questions posed through the Garden Line, started giving workshops and going into the community with their speaker's bureau.

Initially the master gardeners were funded through the University's Cooperative Extension, receiving donations from the local nursery industry. Their structure has evolved; they generate their own budget, operating procedures, organizational staff and funding through workshops, Ag Day participation, Speaker's Bureau and Expert Eye program. Support, guidance, and supplies continue to be supplied by the Cooperative Extension.

The group has increased their contribution to the community in the number of volunteer hours they accumulate. In 1987 they contributed 1520 hours, 1990 - 3583 hours, and in 2009 their total was 8623 hours. In addition they accumulated 1146 hours of advanced training in 2009.

The New Castle County Master Gardeners have a general meeting on the first Wednesday of the month to continue the learning process. The organization is guided by a steering committee which consists of the president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, committee chairs and county extension agent, and meets every other month.

As with all organizations there has been an adjustment in the areas of focus, which now includes:

Telephone and Diagnostics Committee

This committee has a monthly meeting on the third Tuesday of the month. At this meeting a guest speaker discusses items of current interest, and the team discusses items pertinent to operating the Garden Line. The team is responsible for answering calls from homeowners regarding home and garden questions. In 2009 approximately 1700 calls were returned. The team also replies to inquiries that are received by email and examines countless samples that are brought into the office for diagnosis. The phones are manned daily from March 1st through October 31st with a volunteer taking either a morning or afternoon shift. November 1st to February 28 the phones are monitored on a weekly basis, as volume decreases.

Workshops and Speaker's Bureau Committee

Produces workshops in the spring and fall relating to horticulture issues. Offerings include:

- Backyard Composting
- Native Scapes
- Growing vegetables at home
- Plan your vegetable garden for maximum yield
- Berries
- Herbs
- Container Gardening
- Backyard propagation
- Also, demonstrations in the native plant and vegetable teaching gardens

The Speaker's Bureau will arrange for a Master Gardener to come to your organization, for a donation, and present a talk on a horticultural subject.

The Expert Eye Program is a part of workshops; this is a recently introduced program that brings at least two Master Gardeners to your property for a donation. On site, these Master Gardeners will answer your questions regarding lawn and horticultural problems. They will spend up to two hours answering your questions and will also provide a written report regarding the visit.

Youth Education Committee

Presents programs in local schools that fit in with Delaware state requirements. Programs are provided for grades K-8 and are on a spring, fall rotation. Offerings include:

- Give it to the worms – composting
- Trees in spring
- Taming the wild ivy
- Life cycle of plants
- The Magic of soil
- Buzz of bees
- Insect detectives
- Life cycle of butterflies

Publicity Committee

This committee is responsible for “getting the word out” to the community about the services the Master Gardeners provide. Many services are free of charge and just a phone call away. The committee also coordinates community events.

Demonstration and Display Gardens Committee

Located at our Wyoming Road location and include a composting site, a teaching garden with many perennials, trees, shrubs, and a vegetable and fruit garden.

Programs Committee

Responsible for the speakers for the monthly meetings. The speakers are usually from the horticulture trade or academia. They are also responsible for setting up tours of interest to the group as well as organizing the annual picnic.

The Ag Day Committee is a part of Programs and is responsible for planning, growing, purchasing, organizing plants and items that are sold at Ag Day. They also insure that staff is available to man the various booths such as the phone team to answer gardening questions. The Ag Day activities have increased dramatically since early participation was only to provide information to the attendees.

Additional

In 1988 the New Castle County Master Gardeners started an ongoing relationship which continues to this date with the ‘Bunching of the Greens’ in Odessa. The Master Gardeners assist in packaging the holiday greens which are sold by the Odessa Women’s Club, proceeds of which provide scholarships to local students.

In 1990 the Delaware Master Gardeners hosted the Master Gardener Regional Conference.

The Master Gardeners celebrated their 10th and 20th anniversaries in 1996 and 2006, respectively, with state wide banquets featuring nationally known speakers.

1996 – “A Patch of Eden” lecture by H. Patricia Hynes

2006 – “Where is Gardening Going?” lecture by Rick Darke

In 2006, the celebration also included a lecture series throughout the year (one in each county) and garden tours of Master Gardener’s gardens and featured gardens in each county.

In 2009, the New Castle County Master Gardeners received the International Search for Excellence award for its ‘Keep it Green’ workshop series. The Junior Gardener Program also received special recognition at the International Master Gardener Conference in 2009.

How does one contact the New Castle County Master Gardeners?

General information – 302-831-2667 or ncc-ext@udel.edu

Web site – <http://ag.udel.edu/nccmg>

Telephone Team - Garden Line 302-831-8862 or garden-line@udel.edu

Diagnostic Team – leave samples at 461 Wyoming Road

What and who is a New Castle County Master Gardener (NCC MG)?

The Delaware Master Gardeners are a group of dedicated volunteer educators whose mission is to provide residents with information to make the best possible choices for managing their home lawns and gardens in ways that are environmentally responsible. Education is at the heart of all Master Gardener activities, which can take many forms, including encouragement of others to improve horticulture practices, teaching by example and demonstration, and hands-on work with county residents as well as the traditional classroom.

Currently in New Castle County there are more than 100 MGs from all walks of life and of various ages. The NCC MGs have in common the love of plants, nature and a desire to share their knowledge with others.

How do I become a NCC MG?

Training is conducted every other year, on odd years (2009, 2011, etc). You can place your name on the mailing list for information on the training by calling or emailing the general information contact listed above. Applications are available on line and through our office. You will be required to attend an open house where the program will be fully explained, and you will have the opportunity to interact and question current Master Gardeners. The training has a cost to cover educational materials; need-based scholarships are available.

What does NCC MG Training Involve?

The Master Gardening Training Program is an extensive 11-12 week training program. The classes are held on Tuesday and Thursday mornings for a 3 hour period, at the Cooperative Extension Office at 461 Wyoming Road, Room 132A/B, Newark. The subjects on the agenda include:

Soil and plant nutrition
Plant identification
Plant growth
Plant propagation
Botany
Insects and their control
Diagnosing plant problems
Home landscaping
Landscape management
Weed control
Turf management
Fruit and vegetable production
Plant selection
Working with children, teaching adults and interested groups

As part of your training you will become familiar with the teaching gardens, compost site and the various working committees.

You must complete your training and are expected to pass a comprehensive test of the classroom materials. Trainees are required to complete 40 hours of on-the-job training before the end of the calendar year, and 5 hours of advanced training. Once this is completed, the trainee will become certified and awarded the title of Master Gardener. Each succeeding year Master Gardeners are required to complete 30 hours of community service, 5 hours of advanced training, renew their commitment and abide by the by laws of the New Castle County Master Gardeners and guidelines of the Cooperative Extension.

In the mean time why not join us for one of our monthly meetings which are scheduled on the 1st Wednesday of the month, 9:30 am (September-June) at the New Castle Cooperative Extension Office located at 461 Wyoming Road, Newark. Contact us at 302-831-2667 for information.

Information organized by Dick Pelly, MG '99, 07/2010