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## What is a Master Gardener?

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A future Master Gardener checks out the University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program table at the 2021 Anoka County Fair in Anoka, MN. Photo by Lynda Ellis.

In spite of a comparatively short growing season, many Minnesotans are avid gardeners. For those of us who embrace digging holes, weeding, and watering, the Master Gardener program offered through the University of Minnesota Extension Service provides amateur horticulturists a way to learn, teach, and engage the community in gardening. Master Gardeners come from all walks of life and “they share gardening best practices that promote healthy landscapes, healthy foods and healthy lives.”<sup>1</sup> Always an enthusiastic gardener, I learned about the program and applied in 2013. I was admitted and took the required coursework in early 2014. I learned a lot from the master gardener lessons. They were offered two days a week and each day was full, with one educational session in the morning and one in the afternoon. There were sessions on soil, how to get plants to grow, water conditions, and conservation. During lunch breaks I was able to spend time getting to know other program participants. I passed the coursework and started as a Master Gardener Intern in spring 2014. I became a certified Master Gardener in fall 2014.

Founded in 1973 by Dr. David Gibby of the Washington State University Cooperative Extension (Tacoma), the first Master Gardener program focused on crop production, but the increasing size of urban areas resulted in an altered aim, to provide urban horticulture and gardening advice.<sup>2</sup> After development of a curriculum, training in the new program began that year in two Washington counties. The concept of recruiting and training volunteer gardeners to serve the urban audience has now spread to all 50 states in the U.S. and eight Canadian provinces.

In the U.S., groups are affiliated with a land grant university through one of its cooperative extension offices. Canadian Master Gardener groups have different organizational structures,

including incorporation as a charitable non-profit (Ontario) and association with universities (Saskatchewan). Typically, Master Gardeners receive extensive training and then provide information to the public via phone or email helplines, speaking at public events, writing articles for publications and the internet, and partnering with other community programs, gardens, and educational facilities.

As of 2020, there are an estimated 84,700 active Extension Master Gardeners throughout the U.S. and Canada, who provide approximately 3,100,000 volunteer service hours per year to their communities.<sup>3</sup> Once volunteers are accepted into a Master Gardener program, they are trained by cooperative extension, university, and local industry specialists in subjects such as [taxonomy](#), [plant pathology](#), [soil health](#), [entomology](#), [cultural growing requirements](#), [sustainable gardening](#), [nuisance wildlife management](#), and [integrated pest management](#).<sup>1</sup> After completing training, Master Gardeners serve their communities by providing guidance to others and maintaining community and historic gardens. Awards are regularly presented to Master Gardeners for community service and innovative programs.



Rain garden. Photo by Lynda Ellis.

The University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener volunteer program started in 1977 with an initial class of twenty-five. Since then, it has grown to include more than 2,300 active Master Gardeners who share horticultural expertise in almost every county of the state of Minnesota.

The mission of the University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program is to “use research-based horticultural knowledge and practices to deliver educational outreach and project-based efforts that inspire change and promote healthy people, healthy communities and a healthy planet.”<sup>1</sup>

Priorities for Master Gardeners include learning research-based horticulture principles, learning ways to help native bees and other pollinators thrive, establishing and maintaining biologically diverse landscapes, building community green spaces, promotion of water-conservative gardening and landscaping, building planted areas that can adapt to climate change, and use of sustainable techniques for growing local food. “Master Gardener volunteers engage and educate people across the state to help them improve their lives and the environment. From demonstrating to school children how to plant a vegetable garden, to sharing research-based information with new homeowners about which plants will grow well in their yards, Master Gardeners are bringing about positive change in their communities.”<sup>1</sup>



Iris. Photo by Lynda Ellis.



Butterfly milkweed. Photo by Lynda Ellis.

Guidelines of the Master Gardener Volunteer Program are summarized in this statement, “we are connected to the University of Minnesota, to people, to our communities, to our earth, and we strive to be accessible and welcoming to all regardless of what separates us.”<sup>1</sup>

The steps for becoming an Extension Master Gardener begin with application and selection by your county program for a Master Gardener internship. You will need to submit a background check online. Once this has cleared, you can register for the online core course, which begins in January of each year, and is self-paced through mid-May. The course includes weekly webinars with gardening experts, and lectures by Extension educators and University faculty. Completion of online quizzes are required for certification. After passing the core course, you will complete your internship by volunteering 50 hours on projects and events that deliver horticulture education and information to the public, while working alongside experienced Extension Master Gardener volunteers. When your internship is completed, you'll start the next calendar year as an active University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener in your community. To maintain your active Extension Master Gardener volunteer status, you will need to complete at least 25 hours of volunteering and 5 to 12 hours (depending on the county) of continuing education hours

per year. Additional details for this process can be found at <https://extension.umn.edu/master-gardener/become-master-gardener>.

The Master Gardener programs around the U.S. and Canada have had even more impact than usual since the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been estimated that during the early months of 2020, 55% of U.S. adults spent time outdoors caring for their gardens and lawns, and another 20% were contemplating doing the same.<sup>4</sup> It was estimated that 20 million people picked up gardening as a hobby during the past year. Kerry Smith, who coordinates Alabama’s Master Gardener program touts gardening as “a hobby anyone can pick up, regardless of physical limitations, age, experience, or access to land.”<sup>4</sup> She indicates that the key to recruiting and retaining gardeners is by giving beginners confidence in their abilities, which can be accomplished by helping them develop a smart game plan and serving as a resource during the hours of practice that efficient gardening requires.

For local Master Gardener programs, this past year was busy, with many activities around the state, including a Lake of the Woods Master Gardener who wrote monthly gardening columns for the *Northern Light Region* newspaper, Becker County Master Gardener interns who posted gardening articles on a local nonprofit’s Facebook page, and Houston County Master Gardeners who, at the request of Habitat for Humanity, assisted new homeowners with developing a landscape design and recommending appropriate plants for the site. A more detailed list of 2020 Master Gardener activities around Minnesota can be found at <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/220391>.

So far, in 2021, my own Master Gardener activities include participation in the Columbia Heights Centennial, Fridley Music Festival, Anoka County Growers Association Farmers Market (Blaine), and the Nowthen Threshing Show. I gave three Zoom lectures on various horticultural topics, such as “Container Gardening.” I attended the monthly Anoka County Master Gardener meetings, as well as five hour-long education presentations. I will end the year by assisting in the “take down” of the Bunker Hills Garden (Anoka) in late October.

Many additional projects are ongoing in my local program in Anoka County. Master Gardeners work together with Habitat for Humanity to help advise new homeowners on what to plant in their yards that matches their interests and maintenance goals. It’s a wonderful way to help people feel welcome in their new home and a rewarding experience for volunteers. In 2021, when COVID made it difficult for the usual projects to continue, Anoka County Master Gardeners developed walk-by pollinator gardens at their homes by planting more flowering and native species. Attractive educational signage was installed to help teach neighbors about the importance of improving habitat for pollinators like birds, bees and other insects.

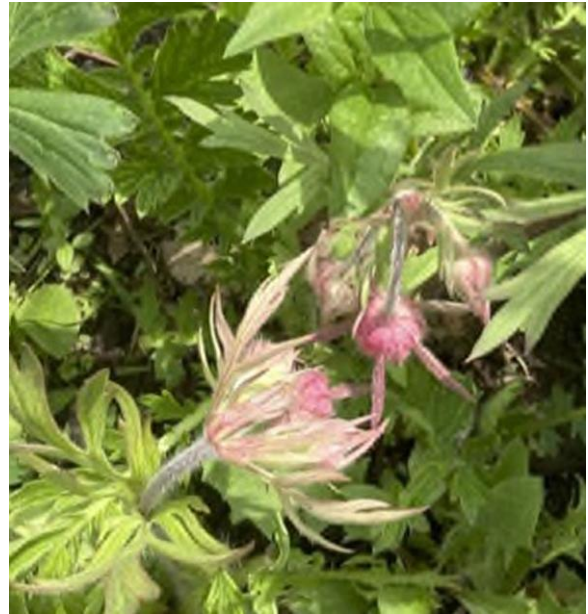


Yard sign on being a “Pollinator Watcher.”  
Photo by Lynda Ellis.

My experience as a Master Gardener has brought me much joy, numerous learning opportunities and friends who share my interests. I would encourage anyone who is interested in gardening and education to look into your local Master Gardener program to learn what volunteers do in your home community. Whether as a class participant or as a certified Master Gardener volunteer, there are many opportunities to learn and expand your knowledge.



Clematis climbs over arborvitae.  
Photo by Lynda Ellis.



Prairie smoke.  
Photo by Lynda Ellis.

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## About the Author



Lynda Ellis, Professor emerita, Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology, has been a Master Gardener since 2014. In partnership with biochemist Larry Wackett, she was co-director of the University of Minnesota Biocatalysis/Biodegradation Database, an innovative, internet-based microbial biotechnology database. Her work centered on developing bioinformatics tools that support the work of life sciences colleagues. Her research focused on bioinformatics and computational biology. She has been an active member of the Anoka County Master Gardener Volunteer Program since 2014.

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