

An Introduction to

Being a Master Gardener Volunteer



The University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program is a voluntary, educational program designed to meet the community's gardening needs. Its purpose is to teach people more about growing plants. Specifically, it aims to provide information and technical assistance about gardening and horticulture through qualified, certified volunteers.

Applicants receive formal training from professionals in plant science, horticulture, pest control, and gardening. To become a University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) master gardener, you must complete the training program, pass an examination, and volunteer a specific number of hours of public service through your local master gardener program.

The UC Cooperative Extension

The UCCE is a partnership between UC (a land grant university) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This partnership cooperates with local governments and citizens to extend information from the university to citizens in each of California's 58 counties.

As stated in the 1914 Smith Lever Law, the objectives of the Extension Service are "to aid in diffusing among people of the U.S., useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same." In other words, we are here to "help people help themselves."

Who are UCCE staff?

The UCCE staff consists of specialist, program leaders, administrative leaders (including regional directors), an associate director, and the dean and director of Extensions. Specialists provide information in areas such as soils, turf, home food production, youth development, insects, ornamentals, food safety, family finance, and many more. Program leaders provide guidance in five general areas: agriculture, family and community development, forestry, 4-H youth development, and marine resources. The associate and regional directors provide administrative leadership and support administration of county Extension offices.

Local county staffs consist of Extension agents, program assistants, support staff, administrators, and volunteers. Their role is to identify community needs through advisory groups, to provide resources, and to conduct programs to help citizens improve their lives. They provide information through written publications, videos, websites, news stories, community classes, and other methods.

Extension educators (agents) in county Extension offices are assigned special program areas in one or more counties. Agents can have one or more program assignments, such as horticulture and 4-H. Each agent is a UC staff member and is part of a UC department. For example, an

agent assigned to community horticulture usually is a faculty member of the Department of Horticulture.

Volunteers play a valuable role in assisting the Extension. When you are in an Extension office, you will find a busy staff working with volunteers in many program areas. In addition to horticulture and agriculture, there are volunteer programs in food preservation, youth development, wildlife stewardship, recycling, woodland management, and family and community leadership.

The extension system nationwide

The nation's Cooperative Extension Services (CES) was established by Congress in 1914 to distribute information developed by land grant universities and research stations to citizens. Each state's extension service functions in cooperation with county, state and federal governments. The organization is different in each state, however. In California we are known as the University of California Cooperative Extension. In Oregon they are known as the Oregon State University Extension Service. In the state of Washington the extension is known as Washington State University Extension. In Idaho, it is known as the University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System.

The state extension services differ from state departments of agriculture in structure and function. The function of the CES is to provide education and technical resources to enable local residents to identify and solve concerns and problems. All CES functions are coordinated through each state's land grant university system.

State departments of agriculture, on the other hand, are regulatory and promotional departments of state government. In California, for example, the Department of Agriculture's function is to implement rules governing the sale of agricultural products, including turf and ornamental; to regulate the use of pesticides; to develop procedures for controlling epidemic pests; and to promote the sale and use of California's agricultural products. The California Department of Agriculture (CDA) is under the direction of the Governor's office.

Although the original intent of the Cooperative Extension Service was to improve agricultural practices, its job has become more than that. Across the country, in classrooms, fields, and greenhouses; on paper; through websites; over the phone; and on foot, extension agents teach and distribute information. Extension publications, available free of charge or for a nominal fee, are available from local cooperative extension offices, by mail, and on the Web. They cover everything from storing geraniums in the winter to rejuvenating an old orchard.

History of the Master Gardener Program

In recent decades, a decline in the number of commercial agricultural producers in urban counties has led to a serious drop in funding for many state extension services. The same time, more amateur gardeners have begun asking for information as they learn of extension's educational resources.

In 1972, Dr. David Gibby, a Cooperative Extension horticulture agent in King and Pierce counties (Washington State), was completely overwhelmed by requests for gardening information. To solve this problem, he proposed finding gardeners who, in exchange for specialized training in horticulture, would volunteer to answer questions for the public.



The program was an immediate success, with the newly trained “master gardeners” putting in far more hours answering other gardeners’ questions than anyone could have anticipated. Dr. Gibby’s first budget was about \$300. Cooperative Extension administrators didn’t know if the program would be successful and couldn’t risk much money on such a different sort of venture.

Today, there are extension master gardener programs in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 4 Canadian provinces. About 110,000 people have been certified as master gardeners after receiving from 30 to 150 hours of instruction in everything from basic botany to the reduction of pesticide use.

What makes these volunteers special is that they are trained mostly by experts associated with land grant universities. These experts offer the latest research and technical assistance to their trainees. These trained volunteers then multiply the university’s knowledge and share it with their county’s citizens.



The California Program

The California Master Gardener program was first initiated in 1980 in Sacramento and Riverside Counties with Fresno County following in 1981. There are a few Master Gardeners who were in the first training/certification programs who are still active in the program today. As of 2006, there are 41 Counties with active Master Gardener programs and over 3200 certified Master Gardeners in California.

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2006 the first statewide coordinator was appointed to develop a statewide structure for the program.

Certified Master Gardeners have become the primary extenders of public information and are considered agents of the University of California. In Master Gardener program was recognized as a statewide program, and in

Who are our clients?

Call them clients, customers, the audience, the public, homeowners, taxpayers, walk-ins, or phone callers. They are people. And the people we serve (“we” meaning Extension and master gardeners) trust us to give them straight answers supported by the University’s research based work. They look to us to solve their problems or answer their question. From their point of view, their issue or question is the most important one.

Dealing with these taxpaying, stockholding customers is the same as any other service job. Offering them good service is the best way to get repeat customers.

Are customers always right? Of course not, but they *always have rights*. They have the right to courteous treatment, a response based on respect, and an honest answer, even if the answer is “I don’t know.” It is reasonable for them to expect us to research the question and formulate the best answer in a timely manner.

They do not have a right to abuse you or to be discourteous. If you do not feel comfortable handling a question, refer the client to an Extension agent.



University of California does not discriminate. We offer services without regard to age, color, disability, gender identity or expression, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran's status.

If we have customers, we must have a product. Our product is information. We extend information derived from the research-based university/United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) system. Our customers have confidence in the reliability and credibility of our information. This confidence is the foundation upon which the Extension Service is built.

Volunteers in partnership—Master Gardener Program policy guidelines

Volunteers are defined as staff who give time and expertise without receiving or expecting monetary pay. The purposes of involving volunteers are to increase the effectiveness of Extension agents and to provide personal development opportunities for each volunteer.

As you complete your training, you will become an important source of information for others. Usually you will deal one-on-one with other gardeners. To be effective, you need to be a knowledgeable horticulturist, a detective or troubleshooter, and a teacher.

You will complete a thorough training program on horticulture and related topics. But the job of a master gardener is people-oriented and often requires good “people skills.” As part of the UCCE volunteer staff, you will work in many capacities, in nearly all cases communicating ideas to others and serving Extension's clients.

Training

Formal master gardener training is provided by University agents, specialist, and/or experienced master gardeners. As needed, other professionals may be involved in the training program. Each master gardener trainee is expected to participate in every session.

The training program provides a balanced, integrated practical course in plant science. Special topics, based on local needs, are part of the curriculum. A balance of lecture and hands-on activities is used.

Examinations

In order to become a master gardener, each trainee must pass a “final examination.” Examinations are prepared by course instructors and the local Extension agent. The test is given to trainees at the next-to-last-class, to be completed at home and reviewed at the final class. Examinations are openbook and are designed to test trainees' ability to retrieve information from class notes, the master gardener handbook, and other horticultural resources. A 70 percent score is needed to pass.

Fees

A fee is charged for the training program and/or for training materials. The fee is determined by the Extension agent in charge of the local training program and may vary from one county to another depending on local situations.

Certification

After completing the training program and passing the final examination, each master gardener is given a certificate and name badge certifying that he or she has completed the training. Certification as a master gardener is valid for 1 year. Recertification is encouraged and can be accomplished by attending training sessions or by testing. Recertification is at the discretion of the county Extension agent and/or staff. Recertification opportunities vary by county.

Volunteer commitment

Your voluntary work assignment generally will be based on a mutual decision of your local Extension agent or program assistant and yourself. Many options are possible, and it is hoped that each master gardener's talents can be used effectively to benefit the gardening community.

Specific locations for the performance of volunteer work are determined locally and reflect local needs. The intent of the payback program is to provide unbiased information to the public while utilizing community resources.

You may accept expenses, per diem, or honoraria, if offered. However, the work you perform for the UCCE is free and voluntary.

During your volunteer work, you will be supported by UCCE agents. This support includes follow-up training, mentoring, and technical assistance. You also will be provided Extension publications as needed for your work.

Use of the master gardener title

The UCCE Master Gardener title is to be used only and exclusively in the Extension volunteer Master Gardener Program and not for commercial purposes. You may identify yourself as a master gardener only when performing volunteer work in this Extension-sponsored program.

The training, experience, and certification gained in the Master Gardener Program may be listed as qualifications when seeking employment.

Liability

As an UCCE master gardener, you are an agent of the University, so you are covered by the University's liability insurance. This coverage applies only when you are acting in the official capacity of master gardener.

Recommendations

When performing master gardener activities, you may make recommendations only in the area of home horticulture, home vegetable and fruit gardening, and home yard and landscape care. Do not make recommendations in other areas for which you are not qualified. Refer questions concerning commercial crops to your county Extension agent.

Volunteer rights and responsibilities

Volunteers working in any UCCE program have certain rights and responsibilities.

As a master gardener volunteer, you have the right to:

- Have rewarding, suitable jobs with clear expectations and support
- Be provided orientation, training, support, supervision and evaluation

- Be kept informed and be listened to by Extension agents
 - Be recognized appropriately for your efforts
 - Be treated as coworker.
 - Be valued as a person capable of unique contributions
- As a master gardener volunteer, you have the responsibility to:**
- Accept assignments suited to your personal interests and skills
 - Participate in orientation and training programs
 - Learn about Extension policies, programs, and staff
 - Uphold the policies of the UCCE Service
 - Act in a professional manner, which includes respecting confidences
 - Be accountable to and supportive of Extension when involved in Extension work
 - Complete assignments once assumed
 - Participate in staff and program evaluations
 - Be willing to use and teach new ideas

Communication skills for master gardeners

As a master gardener, you will work with a variety of people. In order to fully understand a client's question and then suggest a solution, you must be able to communicate effectively.

Effective communication consists of:

- Concentrating and being involved in the communication process
- Anticipating
- Listening
- Asking for specifics
- Withholding evaluation
- Paraphrasing or restating what was said
- Taking note

Even with these steps in mind, effective communication can be a challenge if the object of discussion (the client's garden or plant) is not present, and you must deduce the problem from a verbal description.

Using the telephone

Be sure to familiarize yourself with the office procedure for telephone use. Your Extension agent or someone on the staff should be able to tell you what to say when answering the phone and how to log calls.

Every time you make or receive a telephone call as a master gardener, you are representing the UCCE Service. The impression you create can be lasting and may determine whether the customer will continue to turn to the Extension Service for assistance.

Phone skills, like any other skill, can be improved with practice. Consider these points when answering the phone as a master gardener volunteer:

- Answer promptly and identify yourself as a University of California Cooperative Extension master gardener volunteer.
- Use a pleasant voice.
- Be considerate and give the caller your complete attention.



- Use simple, straightforward language and avoid technical terms and slang.
- Enunciate clearly, separate words, and pronounce each syllable.
- Talk at a moderate rate and volume, but vary the tone of your voice.

When you must leave the line to obtain information, give the caller the option to wait on hold or have you call them back. Transfer a call only when necessary. If you must transfer a call, explain why. Be sure the caller wants to be transferred. If he/she does not, offer to have someone call back.

When answering for someone else, be tactful. Comments such as “He hasn’t come in yet,” or “She’s just stepped out for coffee” can give the wrong impression. It’s better to say, “Mr. Jones is away from his desk right now. May I ask him to call your?” When you take a message, be sure to write down the name, time, date, and telephone number. Don’t hesitate to ask callers to spell their name or repeat their phone number.

You occasionally will speak with a caller who is having a bad day and takes it out on you. Remain calm and don’t take the comments personally. As long as you are trying to help a caller in a courteous manner, you are doing your job. Retaining your sense of humor is an important part of being a master gardener!

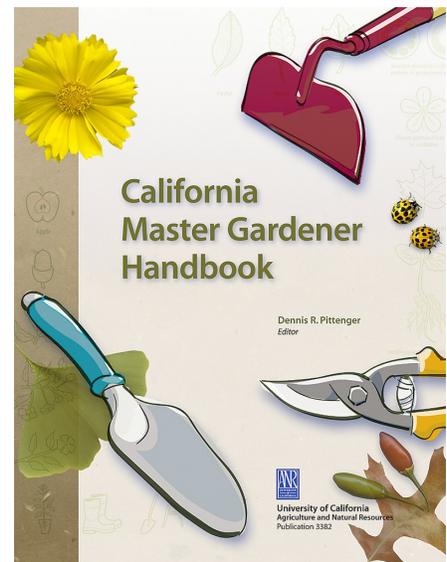
Diagnosing plant problems over the telephone

Effective communication is not just a matter of speaking clearly and listening closely. As you listen to a client’s description of an ailing houseplant, you are trying to understand a situation that you may not have experienced. The situation is very familiar to the caller, however, and it is very easy to leave out details when describing something familiar. The client may not know that the color of the leaf edges or the proximity of heating ducts to the plant are important clues to the problem.

You can improve communication by asking specific questions. By thinking of all the possible symptoms and conditions that might match the description of the ailing plant, you can pose questions that should yield enough information to find the solution.

It is a good idea to summarize your understanding of what you heard and repeat it to the client. Don’t be afraid to say something like, “I’m going to describe, in my own words, the condition of your plant as I understand it. Stop me if I have it wrong.” The important point is to express your understanding so the client can compare it with his or her knowledge of the situation. Surprisingly, your horticultural expertise can be a stumbling block to communication. You might know so much about a topic that you don’t bother to listen to everything the client says. Or you might identify the problem and possible solutions, but not be able to describe recommendations in terms the client can understand. Germination, propagation, and fertilization are very nice terms, but they are useless if they draw blank looks. There is nothing wrong with basic, down-to-earth terms such as “grow,” “dig,” and “water,” so go ahead and use them.

Although some people would dispute this statement, no one knows everything. As a master gardener, you know a great deal about horticulture, but remember that one of the most important things you know is how to find answers. In your work at plant clinics or answering the county



Extension office phone, you will have access to excellent resource material. If a client's problem is too complex to solve readily with your knowledge and available resource materials, take the person's name, address, and phone number. Then find time to answer the question thoroughly or see that it is answered by an Extension agent or Specialist.



Writing tips

Master gardeners have plenty of opportunity to use writing skills. Some master gardeners help produce publications for local gardening needs, others prepare scripts for slide sets, and some write newsletters and columns for the local newspaper. Timely horticultural information is available for news releases and columns from the UCCE.

Organization and simplicity will help you achieve a well-written product. You can save a lot of time and crumpled paper by starting with a clearly defined purpose and outline.

An easy way to understand the purpose of your writing is to create the title. A good title tells, in a few words, what the subject of the work is. "All About Grapes" indicates a great deal of material is going to be covered, including history, varieties, culture, and uses of the fruit. If you are writing only about the culture or pruning of grapes, say so. Do not mislead the audience. Once the title is written, you know how you should limit the topic and what to cover.

The roughest outline is better than none, and its bare-bones structure makes it easy to see the logic of the work you are about to create. It is much easier to repair holes in the logic at the outline stage than later, when hard-won paragraphs, or even pages, may have to be removed or rearranged. It's a lot like pruning—easier done when there are no leaves on the tree.

After the title and outline are complete, start writing. Address each topic on the outline, and soon the job will be finished. Remember to use a topic sentence for each paragraph. Then explain each topic on the outline and back up what you say with information from professionals.

If you really get stuck, examine the idea you are trying to express. Perhaps there is nothing more to say about it. Perhaps it is irrelevant or misplaced. Simplicity is essential to clear writing. Even though vague phrases invade business letters, news writing, television and radio, there is no need to promote the trend. For instance, "We would like for you to stop by our office" can be replaced with "Please come into our office." The same message is conveyed with half as many words.

If you find yourself struggling over a choice of words, try telling someone what you want to say. As you say it, listen to yourself. You probably are using the words you need to write the same explanation. Avoid slang, jargon, and flowery or obscure vocabulary. You won't go wrong with the simplest English words used correctly. The goal of good writing is to communicate, not to confuse.

Perhaps the most common misunderstanding about writing is that it can be easy. While it is true that some people are more adept at writing than others, those who write well usually admit that it takes work. Just as good gardeners must get their hands dirty, good writers spend hours rewriting, and constantly use dictionaries and grammar books. They are not looking up words you've never heard of. They are checking the actual meaning of "cultivate" or whether there is a hyphen in "damping-off." Make sure there is a good dictionary in the office and don't be afraid to use it.

When producing new materials from old, be certain not to infringe upon a copyright. If you want to use copyrighted material or even parts of that material (including art), you must obtain written permission from the publisher (and often from the author or artist as well). Remember that materials published on the Web are covered by copyright laws just as printed materials are. Most Extension materials may be used for Extension purposes even if they are copyrighted, but you still should obtain permission.

Public presentations

Because the Extension Service provides information and educates the community, you will have opportunities to appear before the public if you desire. Not only do master gardeners meet the public at plant clinics, but many master gardeners become so knowledgeable about a specific horticultural subject that they are invited to give talks to clubs and groups. This is a wonderful way to help Extension because there often is more demand for such talks than agents can meet themselves. Agents and master gardeners also are called upon to provide workshops, demonstrations, and tours.

Public presentations take preparation to be successful. Don't be fooled by a casual delivery. Many people who seem relaxed and able to speak without effort actually have spent many hours achieving this effect by preparing and practicing. After you have created your presentation, it is important to spend some time rehearsing it.



To plan a presentation, consider:

- Who is the audience and what do they already know about the subject?
- Is the topic timely and appropriate for the audience?
- What is the purpose of the presentation?
- Will you use visual aids (slides, charts, computer projection systems, chalkboards, plant specimens, etc.?)
- How long do you have to present your topic?

Most public presentations have four components: title, introduction, body, and summary.

- The title should be short, descriptive, and interest-catching if possible, but most of all, it should tell what the subject is.

- The introduction tells the audience who you are and elaborates on the goal/content of the talk. This part of the presentation often is the key to success or failure. It sets the tone for the remainder of the program and should hook the audience's interest.
- The body of the presentation contains the substance and should satisfy the curiosity that brought the audience to the presentation. Use research-based information and cite references whenever possible.
- The summary restates the major points of the presentation in a logical sequence without details. This part should be short and clear.

Radio and television

Extension agents have been presenting educational radio and television programs for many years. If you have interest or experience in this area, you might want to volunteer to do a program or help with a program. Remember that although you can reach a large audience with one radio or television program, it will require a lot of time to prepare. Also, demand for information from the Extension office might increase as more people become aware of its resources. Make sure to consider all of these issues before undertaking a project.



Master gardener jobs

As a master gardener, you agree to do work related to horticulture education for your county Extension office. You may do any of a variety of jobs. This variety exists because master gardeners bring a wealth of expertise to the program. Answering the phone and dealing with questions of “walk-in” clients are the most common tasks for master gardener volunteers. These tasks require both good technical and people skills. However, California master gardeners fulfill many other roles, including:

- Extending gardening information to the general public through demonstration gardens, speaker's bureau presentations, seminars or workshops, and community beautification projects
- Providing gardening information through plant clinics at farmer's markets, county fairs, garden centers, and nurseries
- Working with youth in school outreach programs, special at-risk youth projects, and youth gardens
- Working on adaptive gardening projects with the elderly and physically challenged
- Working with immigrant or limited-income participants by translating Extension gardening publications for non-English speaker and developing classes about growing produce at home
- Working on special projects such as trial research gardens, plant or insect collections, horticulture-based slide collections, garden tours, spring fairs, and plant sales
- Providing office assistance such as clerical or computer work and organizing master gardener activities
- Working with Extension agents to promote the Master Gardener Program by developing press releases, photographing master gardener events, and designing brochures

If you think of a job that will utilize your talents, please suggest it to the agent with whom you are working.

Master gardeners as managers

Master gardener volunteers make it possible for Extension agents to reach more people than they could alone. With expanded program services, agents are more efficient but also have more responsibility. Thus, it is important that master gardeners help manage their own program. While the Extension agent and/or program assistant heads the program, a master gardener volunteer can coordinate volunteers' activities. In some counties, there are several coordinators, each responsible for a different program need.

If you have management skills or think you could become a good manager, express your interest to your Extension agent. Here are some signals that you might be manager material:

- Are you the one with suggestions on how to schedule plant clinics?
- Do you help coordinate staffing by matching jobs with workers?
- Do you often outline a group's tasks in order to get a job done?

If you do become involved in middle management positions within the Master Gardener Program, remember the power of delegation. Effective delegation is essential to an organization's success. Effective delegation includes:

- Defining the assignment in terms of results
- Defining the level of control you have over the project
- Communication guidelines and expectations
- Making resources available
- Establishing checkpoints throughout the project
- Determining criteria for success in collaboration with the delegate

The goal of effective delegation is to build a network of support volunteers to accomplish project goals. The result benefits everyone involved in the program.

Do master gardener volunteers burn out?

Being a master gardener volunteer is similar to any other job, hobby, or avocation. Just because you are volunteering doesn't mean you can't burn out. As you get deeply involved in being a master gardener, you sometimes will need to step back and reevaluate why you first got involved with the program and why you continue with it. Being a master gardener volunteer should be an enjoyable and rewarding experience that provides the opportunity to further your horticulture knowledge, enhance others' understanding of horticulture, and create a network with like-minded individuals.



You might be approaching burnout if you suffer from any, or a combination of, the following "syndromes":

- *The Workaholic Syndrome*
"I must work hard all the time."
"I must work harder than others."
- *The Super Syndrome*
"I must be everything to everyone."

- “I must be able to help everyone.”
- *The Empty Pot Syndrome*
“I must always try to help if asked.”
- *The tunnel Vision Syndrome*
“I can never be wrong.”
“I expect you to agree with me and see the world as I do.”
- *The “I don’t Count” Syndrome*
“My needs aren’t as important as yours.”
“It is selfish to take care of myself.”

Can a volunteer be fired?

As an UCCE master gardener volunteer, you are expected to follow the same personnel rules that all Extension employees follow. University of California and hence UC Master Gardener Program, does not tolerate discriminatory behavior, sexual harassment, or alcohol or drug use on the job. We will do all we can to provide you with an enjoyable volunteer experience, but sometimes we must “deselect” folks who cannot follow the basic rules of University of California or do their job as a master gardener volunteer properly.



The master gardener paycheck

As you know, volunteers receive no monetary compensation, but we hope the gratitude of your fellow paid workers in the Extension office and state staff will help you feel your work is appreciated. Certainly, the number of citizens who come to you with plant problems indicates that you and your knowledge are needed.

As you do your job, you probably will begin to notice some of the “pay” that volunteers traditionally enjoy. You are, after all, a master gardener, and your horticultural and communication skills qualify you to do interesting work. Your sense of accomplishment and pride in a job well done are assets that only you can collect.

Position description

Purpose

To provide UCCE educational programs on sustainable horticulture (including home vegetable and fruit gardening, lawn and landscape maintenance, pest control, and associated topics) through trained and certified volunteer master gardeners.

Brief description of the position

Answers general public questions and inquiries about gardening, landscape maintenance, pest control, and related topics by telephone: at clinics, demonstrations, workshops, or informal classes: or in other ways possible and practical

Cooperates with and assists local UCCE staff.

May assist in preparation of specific educational resources.

Keeps appropriate records.

Requirements

Must be available to participate in the training program provided for master gardener volunteers.

Must be able to complete the necessary 50hrs of voluntary time.

Must be able to effectively communicate with the public by telephone, personal contact, group contact, or writing.

Should have some knowledge and skill in basic horticulture and related areas.

Should enjoy working with people

Supervision

The county Extension agent with responsibility for the local master gardener program provides overall supervision and support. If no agent in the county has this responsibility, program support and supervision comes from the Master Gardener Program state coordinator.

A program assistant, if available, may manage training and/or activities of the volunteer master gardener staff.