UCCE Master Gardener Program helps low-income Angelenos grow fresh produce

Yvonne Savio—who leads the Common Ground Garden and Master Gardener programs for Los Angeles County Cooperative Extension—takes an unusual approach in recruiting master gardeners.

Other CE programs seek experienced gardeners to train as master gardener volunteers. Savio looks for people who are experienced community volunteers and have a basic knowledge of gardening. Then she teaches them the more extensive horticultural know-how that master gardeners are renowned for.

Savio chose this tack because the main job of master gardeners in Los Angeles County is to assist people in low-income areas. These master gardeners provide free workshops, educational materials, free seed packets and technical assistance to residents wanting to grow vegetables, herbs, fruits and flowers in community gardens. Many low-income areas lack supermarkets.

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State budget watch

As of today (July 11), California remains without an approved state budget for 2003-04. We continue to monitor the situation in Sacramento, especially funding for UCCE and AES, and will keep you informed of significant developments.

Steve Nation
Executive Director, Governmental and External Relations
UC Davis plant biologist Eduardo Blumwald has been selected to receive the prestigious Alexander von Humboldt Award in recognition of his research on salt-tolerant crops. The award has been presented annually since 1975 to one individual who is considered to have made the most significant contribution to American agriculture during the previous five years. It includes a $15,000 cash prize and the $5,000 Alfred Toepfer Scholarship, which will enable a UC Davis student to study agriculture in Europe. A public award ceremony and seminar by Blumwald, a professor in the pomology department, will be held in September at UC Davis.

In 1999 Blumwald and colleagues announced that they were able to genetically engineer salt tolerance in the Arabidopsis plant, a cabbage relative commonly used in plant research. Continued research in this area led to the 2001 announcement of a genetically engineered tomato plant that thrives in salty irrigation water. The discoveries were published in the journals Science and Nature Biotechnology.

Scientists have been working efficiently to spread the bacterium that contributes most to agriculture across the Americas as part of the 60th anniversary of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture.

Several significant discoveries during Blumwald’s career include explaining and manipulating the processes that make certain insect pathogens, especially Bt [Bacillus thuringiensis], that has led to a novel biocontrol product and has significantly enhanced understanding of microbial pest control agents.

Federici received the award “for research on insect pathogens, especially Bt [Bacillus thuringiensis], that has led to a novel biocontrol product and has significantly enhanced understanding of microbial pest control agents.”

Federici’s research exploits Bt as an environmentally safe and effective method for controlling agricultural insect pests. Several significant discoveries during his career include explaining and manipulating the processes that make certain Bt strains more potent, engineering novel biocontrol agents, and discovering a new class of insect viruses.

USDA Honor Awards

The glassy-winged sharpshooter very efficiently spreads the bacterium that causes Pierce’s disease, which kills grapevines. The scientists have been working with growers in Tulare and Kern counties to reduce the number of sharpshooters that survive the winter in citrus orchards before moving into vineyards in the spring.

Husein Ajwa, a UC Cooperative Extension vegetable crops specialist based at a USDA office in Salinas, was recognized for the category “Expanding economic and trade opportunities for United States agricultural producers.”

Ajwa received a group award with his colleagues from USDA Agricultural Research Service “for developing, demonstrating and promoting alternatives to methyl bromide soil fumigation that protect the environment and allow farmers to continue producing economical and high quality fruits and vegetables.”

Brian Federici, UCR professor of entomology and entomologist, received an award in the category “Promoting health by providing access to safe, affordable, and nutritious food.”

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Federici’s research exploits Bt as an environmentally safe and effective method for controlling agricultural insect pests.

Slaughter develops sensing equipment, including a device that detects mold in tomato juice and another that measures the sugar content of peaches and nectarines. Delwiche is developing biosensors to detect Salmonella in the irrigation water for alfalfa sprouts. Chen created a device that assesses fruit firmness so farmers can determine whether peaches and pears are ready to harvest without cutting open the fruit.
New 4-H workshops improve skills of after-school workers

A new series of workshops created by 4-H youth development staff in the San Francisco Bay Area has already helped more than 800 after-school program workers enhance their professional skills. Called the Community Agency Learning Series, these workshops are designed to improve the competencies of after-school workers who supervise more than 8,000 children ages 5 to 14 in Northern California. The sessions incorporate the latest research to build workers’ skills in youth development, program management and successful after-school teaching methods.

A similar program is being developed for Southern California communities.

The workshops fill an important professional development need because these workers generally do not have teaching credentials but are increasingly called on to improve the academic work of low-achieving students. Contact: Faye Lee (650/871-7559; flée@ucdavis.edu).

UCCE study documents trend of grandparents raising grandchildren

Alameda County Cooperative Extension took a lead role in sounding the alarm about the unmet needs of grandparents who are primary caretakers of their grandkids. UCCE teamed with the department of aging in Oakland in the early ’90s to train grandparent peer counselors to assist caregivers with financial, health and social needs and provide psychological and advocacy support.

UCCE researchers also assembled census data documenting that the trend of grandparent caregiving is on the rise in California and nationally and publicized these findings nationwide. This research is used nationally to establish caregiver needs, set program priorities and change public policy. UCCE’s goals are to bring the needs of grandparents and at-risk grandchildren to the attention of health and human service professionals and facilitate program development for caregiving families throughout California. Toward that end, UCCE has participated in workshops, conferences and a nationally televised satellite conference to educate grandparents, health professionals and policy-makers about the issues facing caregivers. Contact: Mary Blackburn (510/639-1274; mblackburn@ucdavis.edu).

Low-income families boost their financial security and well-being

UCCE nutrition, family and consumer sciences advisors participating in a national study of poor rural families discovered that two-thirds of Latino families eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit did not apply for it. Use of the EIC has elevated millions of children above the poverty line.

UCCE advisors began distributing English and Spanish material explaining the eligibility and filing process for EIC to the participants in their study. Similar information was disseminated as part of UC’s Expanded Food Nutrition Education Program and the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program.

As a result, the number of Latino families receiving the tax credit doubled, making an important contribution to their financial security and the children’s well-being. Contact Karen Varcoe (909/787-5241; karen.varcoe@ucr.edu).

UCCE helps parents prepare healthy bag lunches for children

A study by the San Luis Obispo office of UC Cooperative Extension revealed that 81 percent of the lunches brought by children to preschool were poor nutritionally and that nearly 25 percent compromised food safety. Seeking a remedy, UCCE staff obtained funding to launch a countywide educational campaign in which they developed five easy-to-read handouts and a poster in English and Spanish to show parents and other family members how to pack healthy lunches. A follow-up study conducted after the free handouts were distributed showed that parents were including more whole grain and protein foods for better nutrition and selecting foods that would not promote the growth of food-poisoning bacteria. Contact Shirley Peterson (805/781-5951; sspeterson@ucdavis.edu).

GreenNet Project brings families together, enhances communities

In 2002 the U.S. Department of Agriculture selected the Neighborhood GreenNet Project as a Program of Excellence in its annual compilation of the best youth programs in the nation.

GreenNet is a collaboration between the UC 4-H program in Santa Barbara County and the Housing Authority of the City of Santa Barbara. The project engages parents and children living in subsidized housing complexes in small horticultural business startups. These families also learn how to use computer technology to access information, new markets, planning tools and networking capabilities. More than 600 youth and 375 housing resident families have participated in the 10-week, hands-on training since 1998. The project reinforces the sense of family by children and parents working together to design their small gardening enterprises.

Many of the teens participating in the program have gone on to college, with several majoring in business, technology, science or science-related fields. They say their GreenNet experience helped them develop new work skills and self-confidence.

The year after the project started, vandalism at the housing project, which was costing around $60,000 a year, dropped to near zero. Police and housing property management said it was due to the efforts of GreenNet. Contact Michael Arzolla (805/692-1730 or http://greennet.ucdavis.edu).

Here are a few examples from UC Delivers about how research and public service from the Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension help California families. More than 140 UC Delivers stories are now posted at the URL above.
often costly, in short supply or simply
and produce stores, so fresh produce is
produce is

Community gardens improve the
quality of life in a neighborhood, says
Savio, who is a board member of the
American Community Gardening Associa-
tion. Residents who garden can eat a
more balanced and nutritious diet and
save money by growing some of their
food. Their gardens beautify the com-
community and can spark further develop-
ment. Gardening also increases social
interactions, encourages self-reliance
and creates opportunities for recreation,
exercise, therapy and education.

The Common Ground Garden Pro-
gram in Los Angeles is the only pro-
gram of its kind in California and one of 20
urban gardening programs in the na-
tion to get USDA funding.

Even after USDA cut its funding by
half, UC’s program flourished, in large
part because former program manager
Rachel Surls (appointed UCCE county
director in July 1997), and then Savio
tapped new resources by partnering with
other community groups and reenergi-
zing the Master Gardener Program. Savio
even expanded its reach: Master gar-
deners now serve nearly 50 of the 60
community gardens in the county.

The Master Gardener Program cur-
rently has 136 active volunteers who
last year contributed 10,288 hours
serving 64,320 clientele, Savio says.
They also earned 5,199 hours of con-
tinuing education.

“I feel privileged and a great deal of
pride about our Master Gardener Pro-
gram,” Savio says. “We are mandated
to help low-income residents, and how
they are learning to garden more suc-
cessfully is just thrilling.”

Savio joined the L.A. County office
of UCCE in 1994. A member of the UC
community since 1978 (UC Davis bot-
any extension and vegetable crops exten-
sion), she’s also a well-known garden
writer and photographer whose organic
gardening column appears monthly in
the Sacramento Bee. Her regional re-
port for Southern California coastal
and inland valleys appears biweekly on

Q: Yvonne, who do master gardeners
serve in Los Angeles County?
W e are funded to assist low-income
communities. Master gardeners give
workshops and help folks at community
gardens, battered-women shelters, home-
less shelters, half-way houses—anyone
who needs help learning how to grow
their own food. We also have telephone
and email help lines to answer ques-
tions from the public. In addition, we
hold workshops to encourage people
to eat more of the vegetables they have
grown (or purchased at farmers’ mar-
kets) by preparing them in a nutritious
and simple manner.

Q: Master gardeners volunteer for at
least 50 hours a year?
T hat’s the minimum. They must also
earn at least 15 hours of continuing
education to learn more about garden-
ning and community outreach. They can
get that by coming to monthly MG
meetings. We always have a speaker
chosen on the basis of the topics that
the MGs say they want to learn more
about.

Q: How do you recruit MG volunteers?
O riginally we called for gardeners who
wanted to volunteer. But we weren’t
getting a good match with the gardens
we had started in low-income areas.
The people at those gardens weren’t re-
sponding to master gardeners from
other communities.

So we began seeking volunteers who
already were working with low-income
folks prior to becoming master garden-
ers. They had their own local connec-
tions, and we started to be able to get
some real networking going on.

This networking has given us the
opportunity over the last three years to
reconnect with every single one of the
community gardens in the county to
see which ones are still active.

I made a point of visiting with indi-
vidual gardens and their managers. Of
the 60 gardens that we know now are
truly active, there are fewer than a
dozen that don’t have at least one gar-
dener who has come through the MG
course.

We determined that we really needed
to have people from the gardens come
to the course and be the official MG
connection for that garden.

That is what has made our program
much more successful. Our MGs learn
about different projects in the larger
LA community and each one of those
gardens feels that it has a direct con-
nection with University-based infor-
mation.

Q: Is it harder to teach this group of
volunteers?
N o, because they are really interested
in learning more about gardening and
helping people. We definitely don’t
Teach a university-level course. For us,
hands-on activities and practical appli-
cation of information and techniques
are paramount.

That, in my mind, is precisely what
Cooperative Extension is all about:
We are taking the University’s research-
based horticultural information and
translating it into layperson’s terms so
that regular, everyday gardeners can
use it immediately in their gardens.