HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

TRAIN TO BE A MASTER GARDENER

Have you ever had a problem in your garden or yard that you couldn't solve, such as a sick plant or unidentified insect? The Osceola County Extension Service and its Master Gardeners can help.

The rapid urban growth in many areas of the United States coupled with increased interest in the environment and home gardening, has prompted increasing numbers of homeowners to ask questions of county extension services.

That's where Master Gardeners come in.

In 1972, an innovative Extension-Service agent in Washington State reasoned that trained volunteers could respond to many of the everyday homeowner questions, freeing him and his colleagues for more technical and difficult problems.

Volunteers, such as homemakers and 4-H leaders, had always been a part of the Extension Service but never in the area of homeowner horticulture. The Extension Agent selected, trained and certified volunteers as Master Gardeners. They soon exceeded his expectations. And so the Master Gardener program began.

Since then, the program has grown and is now active in almost every state. Florida's Master Gardener program began in 1979 and is active in 56 of the state's 67 counties. It is sponsored by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Eleanor Foerste established the Osceola program in 1981. Over the years, more than 275 master gardeners have been certified, providing more than 65,000 hours of service to about 50,000 residents. A few of the Master Gardeners from the original class are still active, each providing the county with more than 20 years of volunteer work.

Master Gardener volunteers have been involved in a variety of activities to help people learn about horticulture.

They also put work into creating two demonstration gardens at Osceola Heritage Park. In these gardens residents can learn techniques that can be used at home.

In addition, Master Gardeners can be found at the Osceola Extension Office to help answer plant care questions.

Master Gardeners receive more than 60 hours of training during a three-month period. Classes are offered on topics including citrus plants, pest management and lawn care.

Through field trips, demonstrations and activities, participants learn about soils, insects, plant diseases, weeds, efficient irrigation, attracting wildlife, natural ecosystems and native plants.

After training and taking an exam, volunteers are certified as Master Gardeners for a year.

They agree to provide at least 50 hours of service to the county by helping residents reduce their effect on the environment while having attractive and functional landscapes. Many continue beyond the one-year commitment.

Classes for a new crop of master gardeners will begin Sept. 14 and continue each Tuesday until mid-December. Classes are from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Cost for the program is $100, which covers books, materials and field trips.
To receive a Master Gardener application, contact the extension office by Aug 2. Class size is limited.

Master Gardeners take calls from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday at (321)-697-3000.

Click Here for more information on the Florida Master Gardener Program.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jwel2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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