HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

TRAIN TO BE A MASTER GARDENER

Have you ever had a problem in your garden or landscape that you couldn't solve, such as a sick plant or unidentified insect? Do you like gardening and want to learn more about it? Are you looking to participate in a University of Florida training program? Would you like to share your knowledge with others and meet new people with similar interests?

If you said yes to these questions, then the Osceola County Master Gardener Program may be for you.

The rapid urban growth in many areas of the United States coupled with increased interest in the environment and home gardening have prompted everincreasing numbers of homeowner questions to county Extension Service agents. Many of these questions are seasonal in nature and are relatively easily answered - assuming that one has horticultural training.

In 1972, an innovative Extension Service agent in the state of Washington reasoned that well-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 extension 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 succeeded in meeting his desired objectives - in fact they exceeded his expectations. And so, the Master Gardener Program began.

Since that time, the program has grown and is now active in more than 45 states. Florida's program began in 1979. The program has been a tremendous success and is now active in 56 of Florida's 67 counties. The Florida Master Gardener Program is sponsored by the University of Florida/IFAS, of which the Osceola County Extension Service is a part.

Eleanor Foerste, the natural resources agent, established the Osceola County program in 1981. Since then, nearly 300 Osceola County Master Gardeners have been certified providing more than 72,000 hours of service to more than 60,000 residents. A few of the Master Gardeners from the original class are still active, providing the county with almost 25 years of volunteer work.

Master Gardener volunteers have been involved in a variety of activities helping youth and adults learn about horticulture. They also put a lot of work into creating our two demonstration gardens, landscape and vegetable gardens in the Osceola Heritage Park complex. These gardens show county residents actual gardening techniques that can be used at home. In addition, Master Gardeners can be found at the Osceola County Extension Office to help answer plant-care questions from residents every weekday.

Gardening in Central Florida is like nowhere else. It can be a very frustrating task for a veteran gardener who has learned gardening elsewhere. Understanding our growing seasons and knowing what plants grow here can be difficult. The Osceola program is designed to help with these tribulations and train individuals interested in using the proper horticultural practices for Florida.

Extension agents and specialists from UF/IFAS provide the training for Master Gardener volunteers. Master Gardeners receive more than 60 hours of training over a three-month period.

Classes are offered on a variety of gardening topics, including citrus, pest management and lawn care. Through field trips, demonstrations and activities, class participants learn about soils, insects, plant diseases, weeds, efficient irrigation, attracting wildlife, natural ecosystems and native plants.

After the training program, completing a comprehensive exam and a number of "in-training" hours, the volunteers are certified as Master Gardeners for one year. They agree to provide at least 50 hours of service each year to the county by helping local citizens reduce their impact on the environment while having attractive and
functional landscapes.

Osceola County Master Gardeners serve as volunteers for the University of Florida/IFAS Osceola County Extension Service. Many volunteers have renewed their contracts and continue to be active beyond their original commitment.

Classes for the new crop of Master Gardeners will begin Sept. 20 and continue once a week (every Tuesday) until mid-December. Class time is from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Cost for the program is $130, which covers the cost of books, materials and field trips.

If the horticulture training sounds interesting, but you cannot commit to the volunteer work, we are also offering a similar program called the "Osceola County Great Gardeners." For a Master Gardener or Great Gardener application, please contact our office by Friday. Class sizes are limited, so don't delay.

For answers to gardening questions, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321)697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

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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