This week marks my twenty first anniversary with the Osceola County Extension Service. Some of the most enjoyable memories have been working with the many Master Gardener volunteers who have assisted me in sharing gardening information with our local residents.

Soon after I was hired, I became aware of the Master Gardener Program and attended a training with Joanne Lucas, a former Osceola County 4-H member, 4-H leader and active Kissimmee Garden Club member. We quickly realized the potential for volunteer Master Gardeners in our rapidly growing county. I enlisted volunteers when our population was nearly 50 thousand residents. We have grown 300% since then and volunteers are even more vital to our educational mission now.

The Osceola County Master Gardener Program began twenty years ago. We trained jointly with volunteers from Orange and Lake counties. Extension agents and professors from the University of Florida conducted the eleven weekly classes. Nineteen Master Gardeners were charter members graduating in November, 1981. Ernie Elliott, Marie Eastberg, Charlotte Johnson and Dot Starkey are still active, celebrating their twenty year anniversary.

Master Gardeners receive over 60 hours of training by University of Florida faculty in the areas of home landscape care, care of fruits, vegetables, flowers and house plants. Through field trips, demonstrations, tours and activities, class participants learn about soils, weather, insects, diseases, weeds, efficient irrigation, attracting wildlife, natural ecosystems and native plants.

The volunteers are certified as Master Gardeners or a year after completing a comprehensive exam and agree to provide at least 50 hours of service helping local citizens reduce their impact on the environment while having attractive and functional landscapes and improving their quality of life. Many volunteers have renewed their contracts and continue to be active beyond their original commitment.

Since 1981, more than 200 Osceola County Master Gardeners have been certified providing over 53,400 hours of service to more than 41,000 local residents, the Osceola County Extension Service and the University of Florida.

In 2000, we trained 26 new Master Gardeners. Sixty-one active volunteers reported donating 5042 hours of service. According to the Independent Sector of Washington, D.C., the assigned hourly wage for volunteers is $14.83. Therefore, Osceola Master Gardeners' volunteer contribution to the county was approximately $74,773.00, saving the county essentially two full time staff positions.

Currently, 54 Florida counties utilize Master Gardener volunteers to extend educational information to the public. There are more than 3400 active Master Gardeners in Florida. In 1999, Florida Master Gardeners donated 222,273 hours of volunteer time.

Master Gardener volunteers have been involved in a variety of activities helping youth and adults learn about plant care in our Central Florida area. Our scrapbooks chronicle the history of the program through photos and newspaper articles. It has been fun reminiscing about their outstanding achievements. Our volunteers have been recognized state-wide for outstanding projects.

School children have eaten tomatoes fresh from the garden for the first time. They have squished caterpillars eating their lettuce and protected others while they fed on larval food plants preparing to become beautiful butterflies. Teachers and children grow as they learn first hand about life and nurturing.

Seniors in nursing homes sold plants grown from cuttings to raise money for special activities. Residents and staff benefit from the projects as people share common interests and reminisce about gardens of the
past. City gardens and parks thrived under the loving care of dedicated volunteers. Landscape design, planning, teamwork and practical maintenance are skills learned through such community projects. Pride in the community shines through attractive landscaping.

Fund raising projects support educational activities for our 4-H program providing scholarships for local youth to attend a variety of 4-H activities. When county budgets were tight, the volunteers donated a computer to the office. A joint project with the library provided gardening videos and references for better citizen access to research based information.

If you have a civic group, club or professional association or a homeowners meeting needing a program, contact the Master Gardeners so they can their passion for gardening and timely tips.

Master Gardeners are also on call at the Osceola County Extension Office to help answer your plant care questions. Call them on Mondays to Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm. You can also reach them by E-mail at epabon5@ufl.edu or check out the web page developed by Master Gardener webmaster Patrick Lamond at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu.

Get to know our Master Gardeners. They are my family. They have lifted my spirits, preserved some of my sanity and are dear friends. They have been with me through many challenges. They will gladly help you with yours.

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Date: March 8th, 2001