

MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER PROGRAM 2023 ANNUAL REPORT

University of Minnesota Extension's Master Gardener Volunteer Program is growing with the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

3,177
MASTER
GARDENERS

185,751
VOLUNTEER
HOURS

166,057
MINNESOTANS
REACHED

Hennepin County Extension Master Gardener volunteer Chidi Chidozie gave tours of the University's African plant plots in August when Extension and the U's Plant Breeding Center brought nearly 100 visitors to campus. Learn more at extension.umn.edu/news/exploring-african-plants



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

extension.umn.edu/master-gardener

A MESSAGE FROM TIM KENNY

In an era of internet searches and dependence on technology, Master Gardeners offer a human connection and build community through their volunteer work. They provide consistent and reliable information about plants, horticulture and managed landscapes.

Guided by the seven program priorities — horticulture skills, plant biodiversity, pollinator health, clean water, nearby nature, climate responsiveness and local food — Master Gardeners work alongside their neighbors and keep them informed. As you will see in this report, Master Gardeners respond to local issues, engage with constituents, touch lives and address needs. Volunteers collaborate with homeowners, veterans, school groups, community gardens, group homes, subsidized housing residents, seniors, county officials, non-profits, parks and many others.

2023 was a growth year. In March, the Master Gardener Volunteer Program staff moved into permanent quarters in the Myers Education Building at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum — a welcome sign of permanence and continuity. It also marked the tenth anniversary of partnership between Extension and the Arboretum for the program. It's been a fruitful decade, and the future is bright. Further attesting to the relevance and success of the program, in 2023 more than 500 Minnesotans joined the Master Gardener Volunteer Program — a record!

This report highlights some of the volunteer work that demonstrates the value of the Master Gardener Volunteer Program to the people of Minnesota.

Tim Kenny
State Program Director



PROGRAM PRIORITY: HORTICULTURE SKILLS

Master Gardeners share current research-based information and promote recommended practices for successful gardening in Minnesota.

Lyon County Master Gardeners created and delivered a series of educational presentations at local libraries to share research-based information addressing the seven priority areas of the Master Gardener Volunteer Program. This series, which took place in the spring and fall, covered many topics relevant to county residents — for example, recommended practices regarding emerald ash borer. Many questions were answered as part of these presentations, and a number of new gardens were established including three meditation gardens, and at least two vegetable gardens planted by beginning gardeners. Master Gardeners plan to offer the educational series each year.

Olmsted County Master Gardeners introduced preschoolers to the delights and wonders of gardening and nature at Sargent's Nursery Inc. in Rochester. Kids attend with parents or grandparents. Monthly, from April through December, a garden-related topic was presented to the kids via an educational, hands-on activity — for instance, planting butterfly gardens and planting seeds for vegetable gardens. Family members learned alongside the kids and expressed appreciation for the Master Gardeners' work. Over the years, Master Gardeners have noticed an increased interest in growing gardens together by participating children and their families.





PROGRAM PRIORITY: LOCAL FOOD

Master Gardeners promote sustainable practices to grow local food on multiple scales and in different types of community locations.

Meeker County Master Gardeners planted, maintained and harvested produce from their 400-square-foot community garden for the Meeker Area Food Shelf, which serves over 800 individuals each month. The garden also serves as a teaching site, educating the public on efficient and effective gardening practices and techniques. Demonstrations this year included a self-watering system, various tomato-staking methods, and the use of trellises to grow plants vertically. In addition, Master Gardeners made a video of the self-watering technique, which was shown at the county fair.

Growing vegetables in containers was an initiative of **Anoka County Master Gardeners**. The project targeted an area of the county not normally reached by Master Gardeners. Area residents, mostly apartment dwellers and residents of senior complexes, lack space for a traditional garden. Master Gardeners offered a class at the local library on growing vegetables successfully in containers, covering such topics as types of containers and best vegetable varieties. In addition, each participant received two “grow bags,” potting soil, a tomato plant, a stake for the plant and lettuce seeds. Every participant was engaged and thrilled to receive the materials to grow tomatoes and lettuce at home.

PROGRAM PRIORITY: CLEAN WATER

Master Gardeners teach about water-wise landscaping practices to conserve water, minimize runoff and protect wetlands, rivers and lakes.

Cook County Master Gardeners restored an existing rain garden at the Grand Marais Public Library. Working alongside other community volunteers weekly during the summer, Master Gardeners removed unwanted plants to restore the rain gardens’ functionality. By retaining and infiltrating polluted runoff rainwater and melted snow, these now beautiful rain gardens are effective community assets for stormwater management. Master Gardeners’ work inspired a rain garden-mapping project, completed as a capstone project for a local Master Naturalist class. Master Gardeners plan to restore additional rain gardens installed at public sites in the county in future years.

Ramsey County Master Gardeners helped restore native habitat and improve water quality along shorelines throughout the Ramsey-Washington Metro Watershed District. Master Gardeners collaborated with 400 students from seven area schools in planting 4,800 native flowers and grasses in upland areas in the park adjacent to Round Lake as part of a comprehensive lake shoreline restoration project. Prior to the outdoor planting during the course of the school year, Master Gardeners assisted Watershed District staff in teaching the students about watersheds, water quality, pollinators and native plants, and providing an introductory overview of the restoration project ahead.





PROGRAM PRIORITY: PLANT BIODIVERSITY

Master Gardeners support invasive species management and native species conservation and restoration in home and community landscapes.

Dakota County Natural Resources staff and volunteers had a goal to propagate and plant 45,000 local-origin, native wildflowers and grasses for habitat restoration. To reach this goal, they asked for help and the **Dakota County Master Gardeners** participated throughout every step of the propagation process and planting. Master Gardeners collected seed, germinated natives at home, transplanted seedlings, and planted plugs along greenways, shorelines, and prairies. Master Gardeners also handed out 3,600 milkweed plants to park visitors, expanding the range of this important native plant.

Washington County Master Gardeners worked to reduce the presence of invasive buckthorn and to restore the health of local plant communities, especially the native oak woodland, at Sunfish Lake Park in Lake Elmo. Collaborating with local organizations, Master Gardeners raised funds for local projects and coordinated buckthorn-removal community events. Master Gardeners also provided education to youth and adults regarding the negative environmental impact of invasive species and demonstrated how to plant native plants and trees in their place. Master Gardeners' annual efforts are restoring the original plant communities at the park.

PROGRAM PRIORITY: NEARBY NATURE

Master Gardeners' projects around the state increase access to plants and encourage connection with green spaces for health and wellbeing.

St. Louis County Master Gardeners joined other community members to design and install the first phase of a multi-purpose wellness garden and nature trail. These projects will provide education and inspiration to veterans and others who visit the Ely VA Clinic. The new garden has enhanced the physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of clinic patients, staff and area residents. It has transformed the appearance of the site while increasing community interest in and support for veterans. Some clinic patients received vegetables and herbs grown and harvested at the site. Educational signs will be installed as the project evolves.

Crow Wing County Master Gardeners provided gardening education and access to the healing power of plants to at-risk youth living at PORT Group Homes in Brainerd. Master Gardeners guided the youth in planting and caring for flowers and vegetables in raised-bed gardens during weekly educational sessions. Youth learned how to grow a garden, had access to fresh produce and were encouraged to pick flowers. They also learned that nature can be a place of refuge. As the summer progressed, the youth's enthusiasm for gardening grew. They did much of the labor themselves and were proud of their gardening successes.





PROGRAM PRIORITY: POLLINATOR HEALTH

Master Gardeners promote ways to help pollinators thrive in home and community spaces through intentional landscape practices.

Goodhue County Master Gardeners answered the call when contacted by Girl Scout leaders requesting their horticulture expertise. Master Gardeners visited the Girl Scouts Camp and shared research-based information about the importance of pollinators. Master Gardeners also led a learning hike to identify trees and plants within the Frontenac State Park and explained their role in the park's ecosystem and pollinators' habitat. The girls showed genuine interest in pollinators, and future field trips to area gardens are being scheduled. Master Gardeners and Girl Scout leaders are looking for more ways to work together in the future.

Douglas County Master Gardeners coordinated and facilitated "Gardening with Grand Friends" for an intergenerational audience to build basic gardening knowledge and skills. With funds and supplies from collaborating organizations, permanent raised beds for pollinator gardens were constructed at the Alexandria Area YMCA. The raised gardens were planted and maintained during the summer by senior and youth partners. Participants had fun while learning from each other and Master Gardeners. They learned about different pollinators native to the area, what they ate and where they lived. Everyone reported interest in participating again next year.

PROGRAM PRIORITY: CLIMATE RESPONSIVENESS

Master Gardeners' work promotes ways to create and maintain resilient landscapes that mitigate and adapt to our changing climate.

To increase knowledge of disease-resistant plants and trees that can withstand extreme weather conditions, **Rock County Master Gardeners** collaborated with Rock County Soil and Water Conservation District to present a local workshop. The educational session on reducing winter damage to trees and landscapes was attended by community members as well as city and county staff. The workshop included an in-classroom lecture by Extension Educator Gary Wyatt and a guided tour of the Project Food Forest site. Information from the workshop reached additional community members through an article in the local newspaper.

Isanti County Master Gardeners coordinated a series of gardening presentations by horticulture authors from Minnesota at the Cambridge Public Library. The presentations provided education to the community about the implications of climate change on horticultural practices. These presentations offered research-based information on selecting and planting climate-resilient trees, restoring ecosystem functionality and biodiversity, and planting and maintaining native flora. Passionate community members from diverse gardening backgrounds attended and were eager to learn more about adapting their horticulture practices for successful gardening. Additional presentations by new authors will be offered in the future.



NEW FOODSCAPE OFFERS IDEAS FOR GARDENING AND EDUCATION

2023 brought about the creation of the Foodscape, a half-acre garden space surrounding the new Burton and Virginia Myers Education Center that opened in March at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. A “foodscape” is a space where people acquire, prepare and learn about food. To this we added our vision, which is to celebrate the beauty of food crops as elements of a managed landscape.

The Foodscape team was made up of a group of talented Master Gardener volunteers, Extension educators and Arboretum horticulturists. Together they planned, planted and cared for the Foodscape through its first growing season and shared their newfound foodscape knowledge with visitors. Arboretum visitors were struck by such things as space-age strawberry towers, a fine fescue lawn dotted with pollinator flowers and peanuts growing as a living mulch.

The Master Gardeners also navigated the challenges of establishing a new landscape around new construction — for example, amending compacted soil, resolving drainage issues and timeline delays. “We are so grateful for this team’s effort and patience — and sense of humor,” said Extension Educator Julie Weisenhorn. “This team was always thinking about how to maximize the educational value of the Foodscape and new ideas that visitors can try in their own gardens.”

The Myers Center includes a state-of-the-art Kitchen Classroom and houses the Arboretum Adult Education Program, the Extension Horticulture Team and the Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program.



CELEBRATING TEN YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP: EXTENSION AND THE ARBORETUM

Working towards similar missions, this collaborative relationship has increased research-based continuing education for Master Gardeners while increasing the outreach and impact of the Arboretum.


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