

Marion County Master Gardener Program (2008)

Issue:

Home gardening is more popular than ever. Eighty-three percent of all U.S. households (2005) participated in one or more types of do-it-yourself indoor and outdoor lawn and garden activities (a new record both in terms of the percentage and number of households). This means over 292,000 households in Marion County are involved in gardening related activities. The large volume of horticulture questions to Extension educators indicates that many of these people need accurate, environmentally responsible information to better understand and practice proper lawn and garden management. The average spent each year (2000-2005) on lawn and garden activities nationwide by participating households was \$440 so it is estimated Marion County gardeners spend over \$128 million dollars each year to support their gardening endeavors. People need additional information to spend this money wisely.

Extension response:

Four new Master Gardener training programs were planned, organized, promoted, implemented and evaluated during the past year (September 1, 2007-August 31, 2008). All programs consisted of 18 3-hour sessions in the classroom and an optional tour to a local public garden to give participants some additional hands-on learning. Two of the programs were conducted during the day and two during the evening. Participants received 50 hours of training on a wide variety of gardening topics including plant science, soil science, pests, pesticide use and safety, plant problem diagnosis, landscape design, landscape plant selection and maintenance, vegetables, fruits, lawns and indoor plants. Examinations were conducted before and after each training program to measure the increase in subject matter knowledge. Participants were required to pass a final comprehensive exam as the first step in Master Gardener certification. This allows them to become Master Gardener "interns" who are required to give 50 hours of volunteer service to help educate others in gardening or to help beautify the community. Master Gardener certification occurs when the 50 volunteer hours are completed. Classes were promoted through mass media, website, an electronic e-mail list, direct mail and public meetings and events.

Master Gardener Training

Impact:

There were 125 adults who completed training in one of 4 Marion County Master Gardener programs. Based on examinations from 113 people, conducted before and after each training program, participants increased their understanding of proper lawn and garden practices by 39 percent. The average pre-test score was 55% and the average post-test score was just over 94%. All of the adults who took the final exam exceeded the passing grade of 70 percent.

Participants in the Master Gardener program became better gardeners according to 107 class evaluations conducted at the end of each Master Gardener training program. In fact, 100 percent indicated that the program helped them become better gardeners. When asked if they became a better gardener, added responses

included: “Yes, in a big way” and “Absolutely!”

The evaluations indicated that participants increased in their knowledge of environmental stewardship and put it to practice. Based on returned evaluations, 94 percent of the participants indicated they became a better environmental steward as a result of the Master Gardener program. One participant stated “It made me much more aware of my garden environment – it made me a better steward...” Reasons listed by those who indicated they became a better environmental steward included proper pesticide use (56 percent), efficient fertilizer use (55 percent), composting (31 percent), and the recycling of grass clippings (23 percent). Additional comments included efficient water use, proper plant selection, and proper pest management. Comments from evaluations included: “I am more careful about reading pesticide labels before buying and before using,” “I mulch grass clippings instead of bagging them,” “I also started a compost pile,” “Conserving water through xeriscaping,” “More efficient fertilizer use, keeping it off the driveway,” “Got a soil test,” and “I had most always used pesticides inappropriately without care. I now know better!”

The Master Gardener program helped people save money. Fifty-nine percent stated the program helped them save money during the period of time the class was held and 83 percent indicated they felt the program would save them money in the future. One person said that money was saved “by not making silly choices for wrong reasons.” Others stated: “I was able to decrease the scheduled fertilizations...without jeopardizing the quality of the grounds,” “It has helped me to do things right so I don’t have to do them over,” and “Avoidance of wasteful ineffective practices as well as mistakes.

Participants changed their gardening practices as a result of the Master Gardener program. During the 3 to 4.5-month training period, 78 percent stated they already adopted a better landscape or garden management practice. Another 21 percent suggested they did not make a change yet but intended to do so in the future. Comments included: “I stopped removing grass clippings,” “Redid all flower beds and flower borders,” “Applied crabgrass preventative at right time,” “I won’t dig wet soil anymore,” “Not spraying my apple tree with insecticide when it is in bloom,” “Mowing correctly,” “I pruned several shrubs and trees,” “Attacked and divided plants without fear of killing them all,” “I changed the design of my garden in front of the house,” “Repotted indoor plants,” “The way I make pruning cuts,” “Soil preparation prior to planting,” and “Helped overcome fear of pesticides – will now consider them if cultural practices aren’t enough.”

The use of current technology was incorporated into the Master Gardener class by showing participants how to find reliable information for their questions and problems using the Internet. Website assignments were given to participants. This had a great impact on many students. Participants valued being taught how to find information. Comments from evaluations included: “I found the web assignments the most valuable because they gave us the resources to answer questions...I did not know all of those resources existed before taking this class,” “The (website) assignments were very good. It made me feel more comfortable with the research,” and “Website assignments very helpful – huge source of info.”

Instructional materials and display samples enhanced the learning experience for participants: “Appreciated the resource notebooks that were provided,” “The homework reinforced the important aspects of the presentation,” “The notes, lectures, quizzes, website assignments, displays were all put together very well,” “I liked the examples (hands on) materials you displayed,” “Class materials were fine – so happy to have such excellent reference material,” and “Enjoyed the class and

all the examples displays – very helpful.”

Participants indicated the class resources would be useful for future use: “We were well informed and our material will be useful in the future,” “Great supplementary material – will be accessed for years to come” and “More information given out (2 notebooks worth and wealth of websites) than expected – excellent for future reference.”

The class encouraged volunteering and provided an outlet for volunteer service: “I’m looking forward to future engagement via volunteer hours,” “Looking very forward to doing volunteer hours,” and “I was looking for outlets to offer service and have found plenty of opportunities to serve.”

Some participants already began following the Master Gardener motto of “helping others grow.” Evaluations stated: “I did not realize that you were supposed to leave grass cuttings on the lawn and have already told other people about it,” “Now involved with condo planting committee, making recommendations and planning for new plants,” and “Have already helped my son with lawn improvements.”

People enjoyed the Master Gardener training and learned from it. Participants stated: “I truly enjoyed the class and felt that I learned a lot,” “It was all good. I learned something new in all sessions...It was fun,” “I enjoyed every aspect of our classes. I learned much more than I thought I would.”

Participants learned from each other as well as the instructor during the Master Gardener class: “Great group of people with an interest in gardening – I hate to see it end,” “Enjoyed presentations of classmates,” and “I also enjoyed the general atmosphere and the other students and learned from fellow students too.”

What else did people say about the Master Gardener program? They said: “A tremendous amount of information was provided in an organized easy to understand manner,” “One of the best classes I have taken,” “Learned numerous things in every session that will be applied to my lawn and gardens,” “I liked the interactive class participation group activities,” “I expected this class to be fairly difficult but was impressed to see how easy it was to learn so much,” “A resource to find any answer to possible questions,” and “This is the first class I have ever taken that I’m sorry is ending!”

All participants who filled out an evaluation (107) indicated they would recommend the Master Gardener class to others: “I will and have recommended it,” “Well run, very informative and would recommend to others,” “I learned so much and have already recommended the class to a friend,” “I would encourage anyone to take this class because so much is learned,” and “Absolutely, yes!”

Master Gardener Volunteer Efforts

Marion County Master Gardeners volunteered 13,275 hours educating others and beautifying communities, according to reports submitted by 186 volunteers during the past year. This is equivalent to about 6.4 full time staff. Master Gardeners provided individual lawn and garden advice to 1224 people by telephone as well as 558 people.

Master Gardeners assisted numerous agencies or organizations in the Indianapolis area including Indy Parks, Indianapolis Museum of Art, White River Gardens, Indianapolis Zoo, Indiana State Museum, President Benjamin Harrison

Home, Indiana Medical History Museum and the Governor's Residence. They also participated in community events such as the Indiana Flower & Patio Show, Orchard in Bloom, Indiana Home and Garden Show, Indiana State Fair, and the National FFA Convention.

The dollar value of time contributed by Master Gardener volunteers during the past year amounted to \$258,995.25 (based on \$19.51/hour from Independent Sector and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

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