

IMPACT



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Idaho Master Gardeners Diverse, Different, and Meeting Local Needs

The Situation

Since 1995, Idaho experienced a 22% growth in population. New residents have moved from other areas of the country and are not familiar with gardening in Idaho. They need information on important issues such as water conservation, recycling by composting, and environmentally sensitive insect, weed, and plant disease control. County extension offices provide reliable research based gardening information. Contacts to extension for horticulture assistance have increased while staffing and funding have decreased. Idaho Extension increasingly relies on volunteer Master Gardeners to answer gardening questions. MG volunteers must have an acceptable level of horticulture knowledge.

Cities, counties, hospitals, senior service centers, and other public facilities also face staff and funding limitations for client and public horticulture programs and services. MGs volunteers are a valuable resource for these agencies.

Our Response

University of Idaho (UI) Master Gardener (MG) programs throughout Idaho train horticulture volunteers. The first Idaho MG program was in 1976. The MG program is now in 32 of the 44 Idaho counties.

The UI College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Horticulture Programming Topic Team loosely organizes programs, which are organized and

supervised primarily by U of I County extension faculty. However, there is no statewide coordinator or organization. However, 12 counties have full or part-time MG Coordinators. Each geographical region and county situation brings a unique framework to the title "Master Gardener".

The Idaho MG Handbook, first published in 1993, was written and reviewed by UI extension faculty. The 23-chapter handbook is now in its eighth edition. It is available on CD and the UI MG website (<http://extension.ag.uidaho.edu>). One chapter outlines the state MG guidelines. The manual is the basis for class curriculum and a valuable reference for MGs. All but one county program uses the handbook for instruction. UI and Utah State University publications, horticulture texts, and the Oregon and Washington Master Gardener Handbooks are also used.

Program guidelines require a minimum 30 hours of class time and 30 hours of volunteer time. Individual counties require up to 82 hours of training and 60 hrs of volunteerism.

Classes are organized, with MG input, by the Extension Educator (70%), the Educator and MG Program Coordinator (10%), MGs and Extension Educators (10%) or solely by the MG Program Coordinator (10%). Classes are taught by Extension Educators (28%), UI Specialists (27%), Advanced Master Gardeners (23%), Green Industry Professionals (19%) and UI researchers or retired Extension Educators (3%). Class cost is \$35 to \$150, including the Idaho MG Handbook. Classes meet

either once (58%) or twice a week (42%). Most sessions are 3 hours in length. However, classes are up to five hours long in some programs. Most classes have a final exam (take-home and/or open book), periodic quizzes, and pre and posttests.

Extension approved education and community service projects provide the required volunteer time commitment for certifying MGs. Fourteen counties provide MG plant clinic service for phone and drop-in clients. Clinic service provides valuable problem diagnosis and recommendation training for MGs. Half of the programs require 6 to 24 hours of plant clinic service by certifying MGs.

Certification occurs with completion of the class and the initial volunteer commitment. Annual recertification is required. Sixteen counties provide AMG classes and continuing volunteer activities as recertification opportunities for continuing Advanced Master Gardeners (AMGs).

In 2001, The Idaho Junior Master Gardener (JMG) Program began in cooperation with Texas A&M University. An 18-hour instructor certification is given in cooperation with the Boise Idaho Botanical Garden and by arrangement in other regions.

Program Outcomes

Today, the number of MG volunteers trained totals more than 4,000 with over 775 currently active. Each year 275 to 400 new MGs join the ranks through participation in a training program.

Beginning MG student knowledge increases during training about 35% based on pre/post tests. One participant states, "Since this course, we have used the resource book frequently for our own and others' benefit and applied a better understanding to our yard/garden work."

Each year, MGs donate over 13,640 hours of service to Idaho citizens for an estimated value of \$208,000 (volunteer rate at \$15.25 per hour). In addition to plant clinics, nine counties have MGs make occasional problem solving home visits during the week. Installing and/or maintaining public landscapes are a large part of the volunteer service. Facilities served include libraries, assisted living units, hospice homes, senior centers, nursing homes,

county and city buildings, and cemeteries. MGs help with county fair horticulture displays and MG information booths. Educational services include classes for garden clubs and homeowners, gardening articles, and 4-H club leadership or instruction. In nine counties, over 6,000 youth and over 200 adults have been involved in the Idaho Junior Master Gardener program. Sixty-five adults have taken the JMG instructor certification course.

Increasingly green industry businesses prefer their workers be UI trained MGs. Up to ½ of class members in some years in some counties are employed by the green industry or have their own businesses. One class participant stated, "Your course inspired me to go back to college to study horticulture." MGs organize community gardens and farmers' markets. They have assumed leadership in garden clubs, arboretums, botanic gardens, and city tree committees.

The Future

Idaho's population is projected to increase by 1.8 million by 2025. To keep the MG program effective, counties will require more new MGs, more multi-county approaches, and heavier reliance on paid MG Coordinators.

For More Information

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