Master Gardeners "Help the World Grow" in the Idaho Panhandle

The Situation
The population of northern Idaho is increasing rapidly. For example, from 1970 to 1990 the population of Kootenai County doubled. Many of these newcomers are interested in properly landscaping their property to add value to their homes, help maintain environmental quality, produce food, and develop outdoor family activities. Some even want to earn income from their land. They look to the Extension office for information on how to accomplish their goals. County faculty in the Panhandle (Benewah, Kootenai, Shoshone, Bonner, and Boundary counties) have been unable to adequately meet the needs of this growing group of tax payers and still meet the expectations of other clientele.

Our Response
In 1988, the Master Gardener program was initiated in Kootenai County. Master Gardeners (M.G.'s) are volunteers who receive extensive training from Cooperative Extension in exchange for volunteering at least 35 hours helping Extension help homeowners with gardening and home landscape questions. Goals of the program included:

- Provide in-depth information to home owners about environmentally friendly gardening.
- Shorten the response time to home owners questions.
- Increase the awareness of homeowners of proper pesticide and fertilizer use, and the proper choice and care of plants in the home landscape.
- Train a group of volunteers in subject matter areas, public speaking, writing, and personal communication so they could help reach goals 1-3.

We targeted people interested in gardening who were willing to make the commitment to volunteer at the Extension Plant Clinic, to give gardening presentations for community groups, and to participate in community horticulture projects. We scheduled a 10 week, 40 hour training course in Coeur d'Alene in 1988. In 1989, the Master Gardener program was also offered in Sandpoint. Classes were taught by University of Idaho and WSU faculty, Advanced and Veteran Master Gardeners, and community horticulture professionals. County faculty organized and taught classes and lent expertise to Master
Gardeners. A training manual and companion bulletins were published by county faculty.

**Achievements**

- Since 1988, 150 M.G.'s have completed the Master Gardener program.
- M.G.'s have volunteered over 9,000 hours to the Extension offices in Bonner, Boundary and Kootenai counties by "manning" the Extension Plant Clinics during the months of April through September. They have written weekly articles for eight area newspapers, and have talked on 3 regional radio shows and a Spokane, WA television gardening show. M.G.'s have given presentations to community groups, have spoken at the Alternative Agriculture workshops in 1988 and 1989, and developed and manned fair booths in the three counties. They have been speakers for the Home Horticulture workshop series in Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint which have attracted over 1000 homeowners. They have also given gardening demonstrations and have provided horticulture information in shopping malls and at county fairs in the Panhandle. M.G.'s have judged at fairs in northern Idaho and eastern Washington, worked with other community groups on community beautification projects, and have participated in tree inventories.
- Extension Plant Clinic contacts with homeowners have increased from 700 in 1988 to more than 6000 in the 1993 growing season.
- Response time has decreased from up to two weeks to two days. Most questions are answered immediately since many homeowners are aware of the Plant Clinics' hours and call or stop at the offices when Master Gardener are in.
- Fifteen Panhandle area M.G.'s credit their M.G. training for helping them get employment in or start a horticulture business.

- Because of the efforts of Master Gardeners, homeowners have demanded more access to biological controls (according to local garden supply stores), and stores are now stocking a variety of organic products.
- Master Gardeners have conducted backyard research on vegetable varieties, and have provided recommendations to homeowners for the "best vegetable varieties for this area." developed an Extension Arboretum at the Kootenai County office.

**The Future**

- Master Gardener training will be conducted in Coeur d'Alene, Sandpoint, and Bonners Ferry in 1994. Veteran Master Gardeners will interview applicants for the program.
- Kootenai County's Master Gardener Program Assistant is helping organize M.G. classes for Latah County.
- The Plant Clinic season in Kootenai County will be extended by 6 weeks to address early spring and late fall homeowner questions.
- Master Gardeners are organizing and will conduct the Home Horticulture workshop series in Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint.

**For More Information**

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