Training Master Gardener Volunteers Provides Substantial Returns

The Situation

The population of the Treasure Valley is booming. In the most populated county in the valley, Ada County, population has expanded by 57,000 in the past 12 years. Growth projections for the city of Boise and Ada County alone, suggest that the population will continue to rise by nearly 2% each year for the next 10 years. Surrounding counties are also dealing with this influx.

Newcomers' along with the urban public, continue to voice their concerns about the environment and their horticultural needs as residents. Their concerns include alternatives to pesticides, plant varieties for the area, landscaping to add value to home property, reducing water consumption through xeriscaping, plant problem diagnosis, insect identification, gardening to supplement home food supplies and/or income, plant culture and landscape maintenance. These concerns have added to the annual 50,000 horticulture calls received by the University of Idaho's Cooperative Extension offices in the Treasure Valley. For example, requests for information on organic gardening and xeriscape (maintaining plants in an arid environment) have more than doubled in the past 5 years.

The Cooperative Extension offices in the Treasure Valley do not have the outreach faculty needed to reply in a timely fashion to all the demands for horticulture information from commercial green industry professionals (nurseries, landscape contractors, etc.), as well as the public.

Our Response

In 1976, the Cooperative Extension office in Ada County implemented a training program for volunteers called the Master Gardener (MG) Training Program. The program offers 80 hours of horticultural training to volunteers -- 40 hours in the classroom and 40 hands-on. MG volunteers, during the hands-on phase of training, assist Extension faculty with horticultural questions from clientele. During their 40 hours of hands-on work, volunteers also "man" information booths, teach horticulture classes, write garden articles, and supervise community horticulture projects. The MG program has since been adopted in Payette, Gem, Canyon, and Elmore Counties.

Achievements

Since the program's initiation in the Treasure Valley more than 600 volunteers have been trained, including 120 Advanced Master Gardeners. Over the years, Master Gardeners have assisted or instructed 119,000 individuals in the Treasure Valley.
With the help of these dedicated MG volunteers, response time to questions has been shortened from three days to one day. Annually, Master Gardeners serve as horticultural speakers for 15 - 20 talks given to schools, hospitals, senior citizen homes, garden clubs, church groups and other community organizations. They wrote weekly horticulture articles for 4 area newspapers, initiated 9 city beautification projects, established a community herb garden at the Western Idaho Fairgrounds, landscaped 2 community interpretive gardens, and each year maintained 5 Extension information booths at fairs and other county functions.

Communities in the Treasure Valley have benefited by receiving over 20,000 hours of donated time from Master Gardener volunteers. This program assistance is equivalent to roughly 11 full time staff, which is a savings to the state of over $440,000 in salaries and benefits.

An additional benefit of the program is the value of the education and the improvement in self confidence for the volunteers. Eighteen MG volunteers have been able to obtain employment in the horticulture field or have started their own horticulture business because of their MG training.

The Future

Master Gardener Training Programs will continue to be conducted in Ada, Canyon, Elmore, Gem and Payette Counties. Advanced Master Gardeners will assist in training first year MG volunteers and will continue serving as project managers within the Master Gardener Program.

For More Information

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