

ASSESSING CHANGES IN VIRGINIA MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Master Gardener (MG) volunteers are nonpaid, education partners with Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE). VCE MGs have assisted Extension agents in meeting VCE's educational goals and mission by following the Sustainable Landscape Management educational program objectives within the VCE Plan of Work.

Local MG volunteer programs must be managed appropriately so that volunteers are prepared for their work, complete their volunteer jobs, and remain an active part of the local program. Prior to 1996, local agents trained and managed MG volunteers and supervised the projects in which MGs volunteered. Budgetary actions in 1996 transitioned management from state-funded agents to a system of local MG coordinators consisting of locally funded agents, locally funded non-agent coordinators, or volunteers willing to take on additional responsibilities.

In order to provide consistent, state-level direction and leadership to this less experienced group of local coordinators and to prepare them for their jobs as MG program managers, current management materials were extensively revised and expanded and new resources were developed. These efforts to ensure that everyone understood the purpose and focus of the VCE MG program resulted in • revision of MG program policies; • development of new volunteer management

materials, VCE publication 426-699 *Welcome to Virginia Master Gardening! Guide to Educational Programming and Resource and Reference Guide*; ● establishment of a MG planning and work team; ● new management guidelines, the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*; ● in-service training for coordinators; ● an administrative website at <http://www.ext.vt.edu/vce/specialty/envirohort/mastergard/master.html>; ● the VCE-MGC electronic discussion “listserv” specifically for direct communication with coordinators; ● and the *Virginia Master Gardener Leadership Development Newsletter*, the state MG newsletter refocused on the role of Master Gardeners as community leaders and educators.

Evaluation of the *VCE Master Gardener Coordinator Manual*, a 14-chapter resource book developed cooperatively with teams of Master Gardeners (MG), coordinators, and agents to enhance coordinators’ skills in managing the local VCE MG program, identified areas for enhancement prior to final publication. It showed that coordinators are using the manual. They are adapting the suggestions and samples to fit their local programs despite the fact that more planning time is often required. Use of the manual has also resulted in increased understanding of VCE goals and the role of the MG by MG volunteers, coordinators, and other paid VCE staff; a slight increase in leadership skills of MGs; and increasing interest and demand for information on training MG to design and implement strong educational horticulture programs for Virginia communities.

An assessment of current MG management practices in Virginia measured the adoption of new VCE MG volunteer management guidelines. Results indicated that the MG management practices

among local VCE MG coordinators have changed to that of a more professional, long-term relationship that is committed to nurturing the volunteer, the MG program, and VCE educational programming. These changes were noted in areas of volunteer management, such as the role of the local coordinator, use of job descriptions, recruitment, volunteer evaluation, public relations, reporting and record keeping, and retention of volunteers. Although the improvements in management practices were slight, they were encouraging and they indicate areas where state MG management must provide additional training and support to local coordinators. Annual assessment of local MG program management practices will continue to document the progress of local coordinators and determine necessary changes and training needed to achieve more professional, well-managed MG programs.