

What Do Master Gardeners Do?

By Susan Camp

Last week I read an article in the Daily Press about remaining healthy and active during the senior years. The writer reviewed several lifestyle modifications and social activities for older adults. She concluded by saying she had enrolled in the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Master Gardener course after her recent retirement. Good for her! That is exactly what I did in 2011, when I retired from nursing education. Being a Master Gardener is a rewarding experience, laced with hard work and plenty of fun with a great group of friendly people.

After I read the article, I started thinking about what VCE Master Gardeners are and what we do. In most states, Cooperative Extensions offer outreach programs to local communities from state land-grant universities— in the Commonwealth, they are Virginia Tech and Virginia State. Since 1972, Master Gardener programs have been developed in at least 48 states to provide science-based education to home gardeners.

Every VCE Master Gardener has completed a 10-week course and a 50-hour internship during the first year. Twenty volunteer hours and eight continuing education hours are required annually to maintain active Master Gardener status.

Each local Master Gardener group develops programs to fulfill community needs and provide specific services. Programs are approved by VCE and reviewed annually. Some programs are more visible than others; the “Gardening Corner” column, for example, is published almost every week in the Gazette-Journal. The purpose of the column is to provide educational information and resources on home gardening and environmental issues to readers.

Other programs in the public eye include Master Gardener participation in the annual Daffodil Festival. We offer healthy plants for sale at reasonable prices and provide one-on-one education and mini-classes on a variety of topics.

Our big event is the annual Plant Extravaganza every September. Master Gardeners spend the spring and summer gathering, growing, and nurturing plants to sell. We also man an educational booth where community residents can find information and brochures on many gardening topics. A part of the profits goes toward providing scholarships for deserving Gloucester High School seniors.

Several Master Gardeners have worked diligently over the past several years to develop vegetable gardens, beds, borders, and waterscapes at Woodville Park. Master Gardener Interns maintain and refresh a large garden bed at Beaverdam Park.

Master Gardeners are available at the Horticultural Desk every Tuesday at the Gloucester Main Library to answer questions and help residents solve gardening problems. On Thursdays, Master Gardeners man the phone line at the Gloucester Extension Office. We also make home visits to inspect for and diagnose problems concerning soil, flowers, fruits, vegetables, and trees. We educate people on safe use of pesticides and fertilizers, particularly agents that might prove harmful to the waterways of Gloucester County and the entire Tidewater region.

A major project in 2014 was the revision and expansion of our book, “Home Gardening in Gloucester.” An entire team of at least 25 Gloucester Master Gardener authors, artists, and contributors spent six months working on the new edition.

A few of our lesser known projects include weekly or monthly visits to two local convalescent centers. Residents are encouraged to participate in gardening and craft projects. A team of Master Gardeners maintains the flower boxes at the Coleman Bridge toll booths, providing a “Gateway to Gloucester” display of seasonal or holiday color for weary drivers.

Several Master Gardeners have completed the Tree Steward course, an advanced Master Gardener program, to expand the resources and knowledge we have to offer.

I hope I have given you an idea of Master Gardener projects and activities in Gloucester. We aren’t all seniors, but even the most senior of us maintains a level of energy and interest that is astounding. In 2016 our first hybrid Master Gardener course, consisting of online and classroom time, was launched. This exciting innovation offers community members still in the workforce the opportunity to become Master Gardener volunteers.

January 26, 2017