

January 20, 2021

On Being a Master Gardener

2020 was a pretty good year for gardening here in Central Virginia. Of course, most of our usual Master Gardener group activities were cancelled, but we did grow a vegetable garden and donated the produce to the food bank. It appears that most of this year's food needs will be at least as great as last year's. Even now is not too early to plan on growing a row or two extra to share.

But right now, let's spend a few minutes talking about Master Gardeners. What is a Master Gardener, anyway? What does a Master Gardener look like? Where do you find one if you need garden advice? What if you want to be a Master Gardener?

What is a Master Gardener? Well, for starters, master gardeners are people who love gardening and sharing knowledge and knowhow about gardening and growing plants of all kinds. Master Gardeners love to work with gardeners from kindergarteners to retirees. They earn their title through study and experience and all have the same basic training, including soil health, botany, insects and diseases, and garden design. They work as volunteers for the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service and bring together the resources of Virginia Tech and Virginia State University to promote sound horticultural practices and environmental stewardship. For more than 20 years, the Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners have worked with the Extension Service to provide formal training for residents of Buckingham, Cumberland, and Prince Edward counties. The training consists of 50 hours of classroom instruction, hands-on lab work and field trips. And, yes, there are pop quizzes, a test at the end, plus an internship, before the well earned badge is awarded.

After all that, do Master Gardeners know it all? Indeed not, but they do know where to find it. A friend once told me that she did not want to become a Master Gardener because she did not want to learn all those complicated Latin plant names. Master Gardeners do learn how plant families are named and how specific cultivars and varieties get their names. Every plant family has a unique (usually Latin) name and these names are the same all over the world. These names lessen the opportunities for confusion when dealing in a global marketplace, or even in your neighborhood garden center. For example, suppose you want to plant some perennial forget-me-nots in a shady spot near the edge of your woods. There are at least four different plants commonly referred to as forget-me-not. They all have small, bright blue flowers. But, the one you want for your shady spot is *Myosotis sylvatica*. The others need more sun to flower well. If you wanted some forget-me-nots to companion your spring

blooming bulbs, such as daffodils, then you would probably want one of the others, such as the Cynoglossum, which produces its tiny, bright blue flowers, in full sun, after the bulb foliage starts to fade.

Do you need to have your soil tested? Want to start a compost pile? Want to know the difference between poison ivy and Virginia creeper? Wondering what on earth a spotted lantern fly is and why you should even care? How to deal with boxwood blight? Which tomatoes grow best in a pot? How to help Monarch butterflies survive? Which vegetables to plant for Fall and Winter harvesting? How do you revive a really tired lawn? A master Gardener can help you with these.

While all Master Gardeners have the same basic knowledge of things horticultural, many develop specialties and become experts in, for example, growing tomatoes or orchids or designing landscapes using native plants.

Master gardeners are easy to find. You might have one living in your neighborhood. Some garden centers employ master gardeners to guide and advise customers. If you have ever been to the annual Farmville tree giveaway on Arbor Day, you have met master gardeners. Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners have an annual plant sale the first Saturday in May and that is a good place to chat with a knowledgeable gardener about almost any gardening subject and find new plants for your garden at the same time. You might have had a Master Gardener speaker at a club or civic organization meeting. Master Gardeners work with schools to establish vegetable gardens and run public plant clinics to help diagnose and treat plant problems. You can also find master gardener help on the HOVMG.org website and at your local Cooperative Extension Service office. If you would like to consult a Master Gardener or arrange a speaker for a meeting, telephone the Prince Edward Extension Office in Farmville at 434/392-4246; the Cumberland Extension Office at 804/492-4390 or the Buckingham Extension Office at 434/969-4261.

If you would like to become a Master Gardener, you're in luck. A new training class is being formed now to begin on March 1st. The classes will all be on line, but there will be no stinting on the training. Since the 50 hours of classes will be virtual, you will be able to fit them into your schedule as your time permits. The new virtual learning program has been carefully developed to make use of all the on-line advantages for students. If circumstances permit this Spring, in-person meetings and lab sessions will be scheduled. For more information about this exciting new opportunity, please contact Amber Taylor at the Cumberland Cooperative Extension Office. Her telephone is 804/492-4930.

As always, the programs are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation or any other basis protected by law.

As we slog through an unpredictable Winter, we can look forward to a blooming Spring, and meanwhile, fellow gardeners, keep on growing!

Jackie Fairbarns, Master Gardener

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