

Plant knowledge to the next level – become a Master Gardener
By: Dr. Denise DeBusk, Environmental & Community Horticulture Agent
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Do you love to garden, have some free time, and want to give back to the community? Then the Master Gardener volunteer program may be for you.

Master Gardeners are a valuable part of the UF/IFAS Extension environmental horticulture program and extend our service into the community. Last year, 100 Master Gardeners volunteered 8,726 hours, contacting 10,299 residents and youth.

For National Volunteer Week, which ends today, I asked my volunteers why they volunteer as a Master Gardener. Doug Collins, a recently retired engineer and 2016 Master Gardener graduate stated that he likes the comradery of fellow gardeners. He learns from others and passes on what he's learned. The more he learns, the more he can grow and share with others. He is also able to teach non-gardeners how to garden. Doug leads the care of the vegetable demonstration garden at the extension office and is assisting the Duval Community in east Gainesville to create a community garden.

Dr. Bob Fennell, a retired pediatric nephrologist, became a Master Gardener in 2007 and he earned the most volunteer hours this year, with over 400 hours. He staffs our help desk twice a week and serves in three school gardens weekly. This is what he had to say: "I have worked with children professionally for 40 years. School gardens were a natural fit. Although learning gardening is a given, it is the life skills that the children learn which is truly remarkable. Volunteering is a wonderful way to give back."

Others stated that it was good therapy, a way to keep their brain going, an opportunity to make friends, and a sense of purpose. Master Gardeners join the program for a variety of reasons, but we often have a place to fit your individual needs.

The Florida Master Gardener title is not a title earned easily. The Master Gardeners are required to attend an 80-hour course and take a final exam. They also have to give back 75 hours in their first year to become an official Master Gardener. The classes start after Labor Day and end before Thanksgiving, leaving you to enjoy the holidays. They are held on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and include several field trips and many hands-on activities.

Training includes topics such as basic plant science, plant propagation, pruning, irrigation, entomology (insects), plant pathology (diseases), vegetable gardening, fruit culture, turf management, invasive species, Florida-Friendly Landscaping, and more. The master gardener training is the most comprehensive horticultural classes offered in our area. The cost is \$150 which includes books and training materials.

Subsequent years, Master Gardeners have to volunteer for 35 hours, earn 10 continuing education credits, and attend four meetings which are held on the third Friday of the month.

Master Gardeners give their volunteer time to the extension office in many different ways. They staff the help desk at the office, answering calls and emails about plants, as well as troubleshoot plant problems brought into the office. They conduct plant clinics at Home Depot, staff tables at local garden events, teach youth in school gardens and camps, plant and maintain

demonstration gardens, teach groups about Florida-Friendly Landscaping or edible gardening, provide horticultural therapy, and assist with city beautification projects.

The number of openings for the class is limited. Anyone may apply for the program regardless of race, color, sex, national origin or handicap. If you want to learn more about the Master Gardener program, attend the introduction session on May 30 from 10-11 a.m.. You can register for free at <http://tinyurl.com/k7p2kne>.

You can also fill out the interest form at <http://tinyurl.com/hqybubn>, so you will be first to receive an application (Sprouting Kit) when they come out in June. The application process includes filling out the Sprouting Kit followed by an interview.

In the words of Master Gardener Greg McGann, "it really is better to give than to receive." If you want to really see the Master Gardeners in action, come to our Ag Fest and Master Gardener Plant Sale on May 20 from 8 a.m. to noon at the extension office, 2800 NE 39th Ave, Gainesville, for great deals and awesome gardening tips.