

History of the Master Gardener Program

The rapid urban growth in many areas of the United States coupled with increased interest in the environment and home gardening have prompted ever-increasing numbers of homeowner questions to County Extension Service Agents. Many of these questions are seasonal in nature and are relatively easy to answer with horticultural training.

In 1972, an innovative County Extension Agent in the State of Washington reasoned that well-trained volunteers could respond to many of the everyday homeowner questions, freeing him and his colleagues for more technical and difficult problems. Volunteers, such as Extension Homemakers and 4-H Leaders, had always been a part of the Extension Service but never in homeowner horticulture. They soon succeeded in meeting his desired objectives, and in fact, they exceeded his expectations, so the Master Gardener Program began.

Since that time, the Master Gardener Program has grown and is active in every state and in other countries. The Florida Master Gardener Program is sponsored by the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) Extension.

In Sumter County, the Master Gardener Program began in October of 1995. To date, several training classes have been held to qualify trainees as Florida Master Gardeners in Sumter County. These Master Gardeners were selected and trained and have committed themselves to contributing the required hours of volunteer service each year to remain active in the program.

Just what is the Cooperative Extension Service?

For a more complete understanding of this unique organization, we must go back to 1862 and 1890 when the U.S. Congress passed the first and second Morrill Acts which established colleges in each state to be financed through grants of land from the Federal government which became known as Land Grant Colleges, a name which persists today. The University of Florida in Gainesville and Florida A&M in Tallahassee are the land grant colleges in Florida. These colleges emphasized teaching subjects as agriculture and mechanical arts. The 1887 Hatch Act provided for experiment stations at land grant colleges to conduct research on agricultural problems. Then, in 1914, the Smith-Lever Act created the Cooperative Extension Service as part of these colleges to disseminate the practical knowledge gained through agricultural research.

In Florida, three cooperating tax sources provide funds: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the State through legislative appropriations, and the counties through appropriations by county governments. Shared information is generated through sound research at the Federal and State levels to people at the county level in the form of a "service." The UF/IFAS Extension provides information in three main areas: Agriculture & Natural Resources (ANR), Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS), and 4-H Youth Development. Community Development, Marine Biology and Energy are associated programs.

UF/IFAS Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, age, disability, religion, or national origin.