

The University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture's Master Gardener History

In 1972, the Extension Agent/Farm Advisor in Snohomish County, Washington could no longer handle the calls from the growing number of 'urban' farmers in his area. The concept of a group of trained volunteers with the specific goal of assisting the farm advisor was contemplated. A core group of interested gardeners was recruited and trained by the local land grant university cooperative extension office to meet the need. This was the beginning of the Master Gardener Program. (*Source: Master Gardener International*)

Master Gardeners receive many hours of training in botany, soil science, plant propagation, pest management, pesticide and herbicide usage, vegetable and ornamental plant gardening, plant and weed identification, pruning and other horticulture related subjects. In exchange, Master Gardeners donate back to local communities by answering questions, researching specific problems, planting educational and therapeutic gardens, providing public speakers and much more.

Master Gardener programs exist in every state in the US and six Canadian provinces. It is estimated that over 60,000 volunteers contribute hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours.

The Master Gardener International hosts a North American Continent conference every other year in various locations and acts as a clearinghouse for ideas and information. The United States is also divided into regions which hold Master Gardener conferences on a biennial basis. Arkansas belongs to the Southern Region.

The state of Arkansas adopted the Master Gardener program in 1988 in four counties and it now exists in over half of Arkansas' seventy-five counties.

The University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Master Gardeners meet as a group annually in various locations around the state hosted by the local Master Gardener program. This two-day event is an opportunity to participate in workshops, seminars, tour local private and public gardens, and visit with other Master Gardeners.

Another opportunity for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Master Gardener exists in the form of the annual horticulture tour currently hosted by Janet Carson, Cooperative Extension Horticulture Specialist and State Master Gardener Program Coordinator. Previous destinations have included Chicago, Great Britain, and the Biltmore Estate.

County 76 is a state level organization designed to replace the State Advisory Board, and it will use the county program process as an organizational model. County 76 members will act as state staff, help set policy, and provide guidance to county programs. State programs will be County 76 "projects."

The "County Agent" is replaced by the State MG Coordinator (Janet Carson), and the officers will be elected from the membership of County 76. The projects will focus on organizational, leadership, and general management issues. County 76 members will decide which projects will be created, and each member will decide on which project he/she wants to work on.