

Lessons Learned From the Master Gardener Training

by

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Before applying for and attending training classes, we thought being a Master Gardener with the University of California Cooperative Extension program in Tuolumne County meant adding Master Gardener to your name, then working in a nursery or landscaping business as a specialist. Not so! We learned from the training that being a master gardener means so much more. It means fellowship with other like-minded folks who share a passion for making something grow. It means giving back to the community by sharing knowledge and time. It means continued learning and growth as a gardener.

Camaraderie with like-minded people attending the training classes is continuing during our first year after certification at monthly general meetings. Long-time Master Gardeners are more than willing to help newbies learn the ropes, encouraging them to join in during discussions and to volunteer at the demo garden, on the hotline, at information booths in local businesses, all without pressure but with a welcoming attitude. The meetings allow people to get to know each other and to share ideas. Problems are shared, seeds exchanged, solutions generated, and questions are answered. With our questions answered, we are better prepared to go out into the community and field questions from the public.

In response to almost any question, the Master Gardener will ask, "What is your elevation?" Where someone lives in this county means so much in terms of what plants do well in that area, how much to irrigate, and what type of soil is present. We anticipated that our volunteer role in sharing knowledge and helping others with plant problems, successes, and interests, would be satisfying; we were proven correct. Staffing information booths at local stores and working at events like the Farmers Market, the recent Seed Exchange, the demo garden, and next month's Home and Garden Show, to name a few, have taught us how to research. As a client walks by and asks questions like, "How can I keep gophers from my garden vegetables," or, "What plant choices do I have for my north-facing entryway?" the master gardener volunteers present start brainstorming ideas. We look through reference guides, find pest notes from the UC Integrated Pest Management program (www.ipm.ucdavis.edu), and talk together to find answers to the client's question. We enjoy collaborating on the hunt for the answer as well as helping the person who asked the question, happily share our gardening knowledge and freely admitting when we do not know the answer...but striving to find it in the best way possible.

This interest in helping by sharing knowledge and researching to find the answer not only helps the client, but also helps Master Gardeners continue to learn and grow as gardeners. Master Gardeners are required to have 12 hours of continuing education a year after certification, expanding upon knowledge gained from their own gardening experiences in addition to the four-month long training classes to earn Master Gardener certification. Over this last year, we have learned the many opportunities to earn those continuing education hours. We may attend statewide conferences, read plant related

articles, and participate in monthly meetings. At many of the monthly meetings, an hour-long education session is presented. In our first year's meetings some topics covered were plant propagation, sustainable garden design, greenhouse design, fruit tree pruning, learning the nutritional benefits of school gardens, plant disease identification, and developing community gardens.

In our first year as Master Gardeners, we certainly have learned there is so much more to being a Master Gardener than we originally thought. Being a Master Gardener means working with others to develop our horticultural skills, which we can use to give more back to the community.

Nancy Morton is a Tuolumne County native whose love of gardening began as a little girl working alongside her father in his vegetable garden and with her mother planting flowers.

Suzanne Hennessy grew up with lovely English gardens, spent 6 years in lush San Diego, then came to Tuolumne County for the gardening challenge 33 years ago.