

Mastering the Garden

by Tree Bernstein

"The love of gardening is a seed once sown that never dies." - Gertrude Jekyll

The Master Gardener Program is a marvel of good will and community service. Master Gardeners can help you identify a pest, show you how to test the PH of your soil, and even recommend the perfect plant for that dry, shady spot in your garden. The wonder of it all is that you, too, can become a Master Gardener. The first Master Gardener Program was initiated in Washington state in 1973. Cooperative Extension Service provides horticultural science-based training to volunteers, who then assist Extension agents fielding calls from citizens in urban areas who need help with plants and pests. Master Gardener volunteers are trained in many aspects of horticultural care. In return for this training, certified Master Gardeners share their expertise in their community through workshops, help-lines and information kiosks around the county.



Cooperative Extension and Master Gardener Programs, which are affiliated with most land-grant universities, are in every state of the nation. Master Gardener volunteers educate local communities by supplying sound horticultural science to manage the landscape in a sustainable manner. Master Gardeners look at the big picture to integrate environmental and social priorities, such as water conservation and water quality, managing invasive species, and increasing public awareness of the value of drought-tolerant and fire-safe plantings for home and public landscapes.

Naturally, each state has its own challenges with soil, growing seasons, and yield, not to mention pests. Even within the Golden State, the plant hardiness zone varies from one to 24. You might move across town and find yourself in a completely new growing environment. When I moved to California from Colorado, I was amazed at the rich soil in my backyard. It was like chocolate cake, unlike the clay and rock I worked with in Boulder. However, I soon learned that this rich, dark soil had a lot of other fans, including relentless bugs and rodents that don't go south for the winter. While many of the tenets of the Colorado Master Gardener training still remain true, I feel a need to update my skills for California with a refresher course. In particular, I want to understand the mind of the vole and learn how to dissuade this creature from tunneling in my lettuce bed. Each Master Gardener Program tailors its program to the needs of its community—which is a tremendous service to all.

The University of California system is home to 64 Cooperative Extension offices, which are really *de facto* local problem-solving centers. With more than 400 specialists at University Extensions, and with farm, home, and youth advisors all over the state, the Extension program has a wide reach, which includes 4-H youth development programs along with Master Gardener, Master Food Preserver, and Master Food Shopper education. From Alameda to Yuba, Master Gardener programs and experts are available. (For complete information about a Master Gardener program in your area, visit the website: camastergardeners.ucdavis.edu/California.)

Hand-in-hand with this sensible approach to ethical and sustainable gardening is a whole lot of fun. It's a soul-satisfying endeavor that engenders a deep appreciation for propagating good gardening practices — and it begins in your own backyard.

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Interested in Becoming a Master Gardener?

Who becomes a Master Gardener:

Master Gardeners share a number of qualities – they are enthusiastic, willing to learn and help others, and able to communicate with diverse groups. Experience and a background in gardening are also important. Every effort is made to accommodate everyone who applies; however training classes are limited, and all applicants may not be selected.

Training: Classes are taught by Cooperative Extension Advisors and other horticulture specialists. Classes include: introduction to horticulture; soil and plant nutrition; pests and diseases and their control; plant management; and diagnosis of plant problems. Training takes place over several months (mid-February through mid-June) and is adapted to local needs and environment.

Certification: Certified Master Gardeners have participated in the training program, passed an exam, and completed their volunteer hours. After completing the classes, the Master Gardener volunteers 50 hours and commits to 12 hours additional educational credits in the following year. Certified Master Gardeners maintain their status with 25 hours of volunteer service and 12 hours of educational credits annually. Ongoing educational programs are offered to help Master Gardeners fulfill their required educational credits.

What Master Gardeners do: Under the supervision of the UCCE Horticulture Advisor, the UC Master Gardeners of Santa Barbara County serve the community through their telephone helpline, newspaper articles, demonstration projects at local gardens, schools, information booths at Farmers Markets, and various other community projects. Master Gardeners must follow the recommendations of the University of California Cooperative Extension. The title "Master Gardener" can only be used by those who are serving as agents of the University of California.

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