



Plant Detectives Provide Help to Home Gardeners

Do you wonder why your crabapple trees are dropping so many yellow leaves or how to deal with those pesky green bugs eating your roses? University of Illinois Extension is here to help answer all your gardening questions using our front line of attack - Master Gardener volunteers (MGs).

Homeowner yard and garden questions come into our Extension office in many ways, including phone calls, emails, walk-ins, internet requests, program events, and more. A "Garden Helpline" has MGs available at regular hours throughout the growing season serving as Plant Detectives.

During the 2011 growing season, our unit offices documented direct responses to 800 homeowner gardening questions. In addition, MGs answer many more questions through sponsored events, community presentations, and direct contacts with friends and family.

The Master Gardener Program began in 1972 in Washington State in response to increasing requests in county Extension offices for horticultural information. Illinois launched the program in 1975. The program is a great success in the Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Extension Unit with nearly 250 MGs.



In 2010, the efforts of nearly 250 Extension Master Gardener volunteers in our Extension Unit resulted in:

- *8,596 hours of volunteer service*
- *an equivalent to 4.1 full time staff*
- *a monetary value \$179,227.00*

Although answers to office queries initially impact individual gardeners, the educational message spreads exponentially from there. A California study found that trained MG volunteers allow professional staff to spend 50% less time answering routine queries. MGs pick up this difference, and spend more than double that amount of time answering phone requests. A Minnesota study found that the public highly valued the positive impact that MGs had on their community and the environment as they implemented sound horticultural practices recommended by MGs.

Providing answers to homeowner yard and garden questions is a longtime Extension benefit that endures. Plans are in place to strengthen the front line of MG Plant Detectives through additional diagnosis training. Master Gardener volunteers and Extension staff in this unit are armed and ready to "Help Others Learn to Grow."

For more information about this unit's horticulture programs, go to <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/fmpt> or contact Rhonda Ferree, extension educator in horticulture (ferreer@illinois.edu), or Julia Pryor, program coordinator (jpryor@illinois.edu).