Regular meetings for University of Illinois Extension Master Gardeners help keep them engaged and current. They are an opportunity for these volunteers to discuss projects, events, and learn something new. For many volunteers, meetings work toward the annual requirements they need to maintain their active Master Gardener status, 10 hours of continuing education and 30 hours of volunteer hours.

Illinois Extension Master Gardeners serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties have various meetings available to help them meet their volunteer goals. In general, all county groups meet monthly with some meetings during the day and others in the evening. All groups typically begin with an educational program or tour, followed by a business meeting.

The variety of topics offered at monthly meetings are numerous. For example, during their 2018 meetings Fulton–Mason Master Gardeners learned about hops from a local grower, Tazewell Master Gardeners updated their knowledge on orchids, and Peoria Master Gardeners expanded their understanding of butterflies and butterfly plants.

Attending the business portion of the meeting counts towards a Master Gardener’s volunteer hours. During the business portion of the meeting, members discuss crucial issues and projects and make decisions. For many volunteers, this is the primary way they stay informed of the group’s activities. Major events planned during monthly meetings include the annual Peoria Plant Sale, Tazewell Plant Bingo, and Fulton–Mason Gardeners’ BIG Day.

Equally important, meetings are a time for social interaction & collaboration. It is a great time to learn from colleagues, share ideas, and plan events. Each year one group hosts a meeting for volunteers in all four counties. In 2016, Tazewell county hosted an event at Wildlife Prairie Park where a fellow Master Gardener discussed herbs. In 2017, the Fulton–Mason group presented miniature gardens at Big Creek Park in Canton. The 2018 combined event will be hosted by Peoria county at Luthy Botanical Garden.

Tours sometimes take the place of more formal educational presentations. In 2017, the Peoria group visited Blue Ridge Community Farm in Chillicothe to learn about the farm’s opportunities for children and adults with special needs. Tazewell Master Gardeners hold at least one meeting per year at a private residence to see and learn about specific plants and horticultural practices. This year it was held at Ingleside Farm, Green Valley to tour the private arboretum.

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This summer the Fulton–Mason group have been enjoying several meetings hosted by members of their group with the host leading a lesson and offering garden tours.

The monthly meetings serve a valuable purpose with respect to the Master Gardener experience and volunteer development.