Training Volunteers Across State Lines: A Regional Approach to Master Gardener Training in Southeastern Washington and Northern Idaho

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Abstract

WSU and UI Master Gardener (MG) volunteers provide science-based information on horticulture and environmentally sound gardening practices. However, there is a limited number of Extension faculty in Southeastern Washington and Northern Idaho with the expertise, time and resources to train MG volunteers. The goal of the regional Master Gardener training was to provide a high-quality, cost-effective training that utilized the resources of both WSU and the UI. Fifty-six hours of training was provided to class participants, including web-based on-line learning in 2010. Classes were held every Tuesday afternoon from January through April, with participants from 6 different counties. WSU Asotin County Extension coordinates this training, with fees generated from the classes supporting the local Master Gardener program. Course instructors include WSU and UI faculty representing 6 departments: county-based faculty; nursery owners, MGs, weed coordinators and urban foresters. Over 250 individuals have participated in the trainings since 2002. A survey was administered 8-months after the most recent training, with a 57% response rate. One-hundred percent of the participants said the training increased their horticultural knowledge and their ability to serve as MGs. Seventy-one percent increased their understanding of pest life cycles; 62% increased their ability to choose plants that thrive in local environmental conditions; and 58% increased their ability to diagnose insect pests and plant diseases. Seventy percent indicated that they plan to become MGs in their counties. This regional approach has allowed County Extension Offices to provide a high quality training that meets the needs of local clientele.

Background and Need

Surveys and feedback from local advisory committees indicated a need for Master Gardener and horticulture training in Southeastern Washington and Northern Idaho. However, there is a limited number of Extension faculty in the region with the expertise, time and resources available to train Master Gardener volunteers. A regional training class for individuals within a 60-mile radius of the Lewis-Clark Valley has been offered in even-numbered years since 2002. In 2008, 80-hours of intensive training were provided to 65 participants from 6 different counties. The 2010 training began in January. Over 250 individuals have completed the course since 2002.

Teaching Methods

A Sustainable Gardening curriculum written by WSU and Oregon State University is used as the primary text for the course. On-line Learning Modules are new for the 2010 course. The weekly 4-hour classes are held from mid January through April. In order to meet the diverse learning needs of the trainees, instructors use a combination of lectures, small group activities, demonstrations, and question and answer sessions to discuss course topics.

Selected Course Topics

- Botany
- Lawns
- Composting
- Trees and Vegetables
- Woody and Ornamental Plants
- Fertilizing
- Soils and Fertilizers
- Sustainable Landscape Design
- Soil Testing
- Integrated Pest Management
- Diagnosing Plant Problems
- Weed Management

Class breaks are used by the participants to ask more in-depth questions of the class instructors and to network with other course participants. An interactive website is used to post PowerPoint lectures, and to access additional handouts from in-class presenters. Tours of the WSU and UI campuses are used to enforce key learning concepts and to provide additional experiential learning. Ten on-campus faculty from WSU and the UI taught classes during 2008, in addition to 4 county-based Extension faculty, county weed coordinators, the Lewiston City Urban Forester, nursery owners, and veteran MGs. Each person that planned to become a certified Master Gardener was required to pass the weekly open-book quizzes on the 22 topics discussed in the Sustainable Gardening Handbook. Individuals are considered certified Master Gardeners after they have completed the course and given back 40-hours of service to their local Extension Office.

Retention Rate of Master Gardeners in Asotin County

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2008</th>
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<td>Retention Rate (%)</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
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Quote from participant...

“We have capable devoted Master Gardeners who spend many hours enriching our community through projects, individual help, plant clinics, and school programs.”