

If you've been enjoying my column, like being outside, enjoy gardening, are curious about horticulture and want to learn more, or love getting to teach people about plants, I'd like to invite you to consider being a part of the Master Gardener Program.

The Master Gardener Volunteer Program was started in Nebraska in 1976, but it is a nationwide program. It began as a response to the overwhelming amount of horticulture related questions that Nebraska Extension was receiving, volunteers were trained to be able to answer questions. In exchange for this training, volunteers would contribute their time to their county and community through answering the overflow of questions and a variety of other horticulture related volunteer hours.

If you would decide to become a Master Gardener, the first year will go something like this. New members will start as a Master Gardener trainee. After they have completed forty hours of classes that are approved by their program coordinator, they will become Master Gardener interns. Classes cover things such as botany, pesticide safety, landscape management, growing environments, and several other topics. Classes hosted here in Buffalo County will be in February and March in the evenings. New Master Gardeners may have to attend some classes in Hall County around the same time in order to reach the forty hour minimum. First year volunteers will also need to complete forty hours of volunteer time. Volunteer time does not have to be physical labor. If labor is hard for you, don't let that be the reason that you don't become a Master Gardener volunteer. Volunteers can do anything from a Master Gardener Newsletter, to guest teaching at schools, to helping at the county fair, to helping manage gardens.

There are a few requirements to become a Master Gardener. Volunteers have to be at least 19 years of age, have a strong volunteer ethic, and be willing to commit to completing both the volunteer and education hours. Background checks will also be ran, as volunteers may be working with minors. There is also a one-time fee for new Master Gardeners. This fee pays for your Master Gardener handbook, Master Gardener t-shirt, and nametag, and also covers the annual fee. If you cannot pay the fee, but would still like to be an Extension Master Gardener, please contact me. Inability to pay will not affect your eligibility as a Master Gardener.

Returning Master Gardeners only have to attend ten hours of class and complete twenty hours of volunteer service. There is a state fee for each returning master gardener. If you were a Master Gardener and are no longer active, you only need to complete twenty hours of class and twenty hours of volunteer time in order to be reinstated as an active Master Gardener. If you are an active or inactive Master Gardener and have not been getting my announcement emails, please let me know so we can get it corrected.

There will be an informational session for you to come and be able to ask questions and meet with me about becoming a Master Gardener on November 10th at the Buffalo County Extension Building from 2-3pm. If you are coming to the meeting, please RSVP by November 6th. If there isn't much interest, I will cancel the meeting and meet with interested participants on an individual basis. If you can't make the informational meeting, you are more than welcome to stop by the office, shoot me an email, or give me a call and I'll be more than happy to help you out. Again, please RSVP with either the Buffalo County office or myself at 308-236-1235 or at mearnest2@unl.edu.