

## Ian Peterson 2023 Summary Statement

Since joining extension in June of 2023, I have had many positive experiences learning about how extension works and the many community connections that I am able to make. I have been finding my way with multiple groups within the Horticulture, Landscape and Environmental Systems program area and with both my local county office and with a number of the other offices within my accountability region. My main impacts in 2023 have been from my involvement with the Pollinator Habitat Certification team, my role as the Extension Board lead educator for Dodge County and frequent participation in other county Board meetings.

### **Pollinator Habitat Certification Program**

I joined the Pollinator Habitat group because of my knowledge of and experience with native landscaping and native plants' importance as food sources and host plants for beneficial insects and other wildlife. In my first few months as a member, I helped review an updated list of Nebraska and regional native plants included on the certification application. When asked to help, I offered to also research and expand the list to include additional plant features such as habit, culture, color, associated pollinators and host status. My goal is to be able to create multiple types of resources for program members and members of the community to support their diverse goals with what they choose to plant. [The breakdown I created](#) is meant to help people understand the best path forward to create something that can function both aesthetically and showcase the diversity of nature one can bring to their home or community.

Having cultural characteristics available (e.g. height, water requirement, color) accomplishes multiple things:

- Continues the HLES mission of 'Right Plant, Right Place', where a natural landscape can thrive
- Minimize inputs and maximize homeowners' savings in the way of water management and pesticides, among other things
- Theme-based resources and publications for client needs and desires
- By having more accessible information, we should continue to see an increase in the number of pollinator habitats across the state – from the start of the program in 2016 through 2022 there were 182 habitats certified with the program. Another 38 were certified in 2023

There is clearly an interest in supporting pollinators, so being able to provide these kinds of resources can help reach a wider range of Nebraskans demographically and geographically. Having resources that are easy to read and interpret will hopefully open the door to more people, businesses and institutions being willing to rethink how they manage their landscapes. We are beginning to see more deliberate green spaces in communities across the state, empowering citizens to feel more ownership and comfort in their neighborhoods, parks and urban or rural spaces.

I have already been able to use my knowledge of native plants outside of the group by helping landowners and contributing to the Commercial Fruit and Vegetable group. I have been on site visits to: consult with a homeowner who wanted help expanding native prairie into 10 acres of brome grass and former crop land; create a multi-year plan for a client who wanted to transition 20 acres of corn field into native prairie; an Extension Board member in Washington County who wanted advice on how to manage the health of and expand an established acreage of native prairie plants. As a part of the Fruit and



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Vegetable group, I am collaborating on a presentation about the benefits of conservation buffers and cover crops to, among other things, provide habitat for pollinators upon which so many of our food crops depend.

To finish out the year, I developed two surveys for program members to gather details on the function and experience of having a pollinator habitat as well as data on the value of learning from our publication, 'The Buzz', and ways to expand programming to the general public.

Out of 61 respondents to one survey:

- 48% said they have added non-plant features such as water sources or nesting structures
- 48% said they have completely, or nearly so, stopped using pesticides
- 77% add new native plants each year

On the other survey, out of 42 respondents

- 88% reported a positive level of satisfaction with the information in our spring/fall publication 'The Buzz'
- 79% indicated they would be willing to commit to an annual fee to support the program

### Extension Board Lead Educator

Rather quickly, I took on the role of lead educator of the Dodge County Extension Board for my office and I have attended other Board meetings for my accountability region. In my role for Dodge County, I have continued the process from the previous leader and my zone coordinator of more deliberately leveraging the roles of the board members in their communities. As we share our own stories of Extension programming, we hope that they will take this information and communicate the work we do for the county, but most of the time it feels just surface level. We are currently working on a plan to expand what that the role of a board member means for 2024 and beyond by actually presenting portions of our programming so that members feel connected to our team and to their own ability to more specifically describe what we are able to do for the residents of Dodge County. In this way, hopefully they find more opportunities in their professional and personal interactions to not just spread the word of what we do, but perhaps even inspire someone, some group or some business to reach out and ask for our programs.

Each time I attended the Board meeting for another county, I walked away with a new networking connection. The experience has really driven home for me the fact that when people learn about the work we do in Extension, they essentially realize that we are who they have been looking for all along to be a part of a project or to provide education on a particular topic. I am excited to see what new relationships I can build in the coming years to really use my position as an Extension Educator for the benefit and education of the communities for which I am responsible.

In 2024 I will be holding programs that promote community health and food systems in the way of home and small-scale vegetable gardening and home hydroponic systems. I plan to inspire community health and action through publications and presentations about the benefits of regionally native plants and pollinators, and the ways that individuals can contribute through their own projects.



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Building off of my successes with Extension Board involvement, but speaking more broadly, I have been able to make numerous connections across a number of the counties in my accountability region and within the HLES program area. From landscape design planning to high school career day presentations, I have been able to meet colleagues and take the first steps toward building relationships to make my Extension experience and impact more successful. I have also made many direct connections with residents through phone calls, emails and in-person conversations regarding their horticulture and landscape questions. Since starting in June, I have had 252 interactions with clients from across my accountability region.

In Saunders county I was able to start the process of reconnecting Master Gardener Volunteers to the ENREEC grounds manager so that, starting in spring of 2024, they can go back to a volunteer project that they enjoyed but have not had access to since before 2020. This will also allow us as a team to evaluate the native landscaping around the building to make decisions about how to move forward with a refresh and expansion to beautify the landscape and use it as an educational resource as the facility begins hosting more in-person programming. As a part of connecting with the educators and staff in Dixon and Dakota counties, I will be presenting programs this spring about small-scale home gardening, home hydroponics, and pollinator gardening.

During the growing season and into fall, I traveled around my accountability region to meet with Master Gardeners to learn about their various projects, as well as spend time with the coordinators for Douglas and Sarpy counties. Being new to Extension and the EMGV program, this allowed me to gain an understanding of the existing activities of volunteers for whom I am responsible and to see other established gardens around the Omaha area. I was able to learn from the other coordinators strategies for starting new garden projects and ideas of locations with regard to having broad educational impacts. Meeting the volunteers where they spend their time gave them an opportunity to showcase their work and, ideally, a sense of pride in all they have accomplished. Additionally, I had my own opportunity to ask how I could best support their efforts and their involvement in the program. By doing this I had two very positive experiences. On a visit to Fort Atkinson in Fort Calhoun, I got a tour of the gardens that volunteers were working on, some who were not Master Gardeners and, specifically, two who had not paid their dues and were considering ending their time with the program. After having a conversation with them and hearing their concerns, and them hearing about my goals, they decided to commit to staying on as Master Gardeners and representing the University in their duties with the Fort. On another occasion, I was able to connect with a former volunteer who has been out of the program for a few years but whose project I was told about. When I reached out, she explained why she had left the program, but was willing to meet and show me the work she still did as a volunteer for her town. At the end of this year, she recommitted to the program, writing in a note that it was the fact that I had taken the time to meet and talk with her that helped her make the decision.

My successes this year have been almost exclusively because of the personal connections that I have been able to make touring my accountability region and reaching out to colleagues about ways to get involved. Looking forward to 2024, I am committed to meeting and establishing relationships with all offices of my area, each extension board, and beginning to create community connections to expand my opportunities for educational reach.