

MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEERS

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It's recruitment time for Extension Master Gardeners. If you enjoy spending time in the garden and landscape, learning new things, meeting people who also enjoy plants, and being involved in your community, consider the Master Gardener program.

Don't let the word Master Gardener deter you. The program is open to beginning and expert gardeners. While volunteers tend to have some experience and knowledge, this is not a requirement of the program.

Master gardeners are volunteers of each state's land grant University. In Nebraska, it is the University of Nebraska at Lincoln where the program started in 1976. In 2021, 25,000 hours were volunteered by over 600 volunteers reaching 280,000 Nebraskans.

Our mission is to extend the outreach of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Volunteers help us share science-based horticulture information and volunteer in landscape and garden activities to enhance community green space.

Education and learning are key components of becoming a Master Gardener. Over one to two years, new volunteers attend 40 hours of local and virtual education and volunteer an equal number of hours.

Once the first 40 hours of training and volunteer time is completed, returning volunteers are asked to attend a minimum of 10 education hours and volunteer 20 hours to the program each year. In surveys of volunteers, lifelong learning is one of the things they most enjoy.

Training topics range from plant identification to tree, fruit, vegetable, perennial flower and lawn care as well as pest identification and management. There may be classes on improving soil, attracting pollinators and learning how to prune or propagate plants. Topics vary each year.

In our general area, training programs take place in Columbus, Norfolk, and Grand Island. In Columbus, Master Gardener classes are held on Thursday mornings and Tuesday evenings in February and March. The Tuesday evening classes are zoom sessions that may be watched from home or the recorded session watched at another time.

Volunteers do not need to live in the county where their training takes place. They can be trained in one county and volunteer their time in the county they live in.

Volunteer opportunities include sharing gardening knowledge with others, community and demonstration garden care, donating fresh produce to local food pantries, citizen science projects, 4-H and youth garden and outdoor education, and more. Volunteers can also create their own projects.

Along with increasing plant knowledge, benefits include meeting people who have similar interests, sharing plants, discussing gardening successes and failures, and learning from one another.

There is a one-time fee to join the Extension Master Gardener program that covers training, a handbook, T-shirt and name tag. After the first year, a minimal fee is paid each year.

If you are interested in learning more about the Extension Master Gardener program in Nebraska, call me at 563-4901 or e-mail kfeehan2@unl.edu. Information can also be found at <https://mastergardener.unl.edu> if you prefer to explore the website first.