

## ***THE MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM***

### ***A WSU EXTENSION SUCCESS STORY***

#### ***EARLY HISTORY FROM 1973***

by David Gibby,\* William Scheer,\* Sharon Collman,\* George Pinyuh\*

The Pacific Northwest, because of its mild marine climate, lends itself to year around enjoyment of gardens. Urbanites and rural dwellers alike have, therefore, always been interested in developing their horticultural knowledge and skills.

Washington State University Cooperative Extension traditionally assigned horticulture faculty to county offices as part of the Agriculture, Home Economics and 4-H outreach education programs. The emphasis of the horticultural programs was crop production. It was not until rapid urban growth and the burgeoning interest in gardening that Extension began to develop programs emphasizing urban horticulture.

In 1971 David Gibby and Bill Scheer, Area Extension Agents, had started separate assignments in the major metropolitan areas represented by King and Pierce Counties. They focused respectively on urban and commercial horticulture. Public demand for information about plant problems was so intense that it made educational programming for either of them virtually impossible.

Initially administrators suggested that getting information out via the mass media would solve that problem. The result was that television and radio gardening shows put on by Gibby served only to make the public aware that the Extension office was the place to get help. Consequently Gibby and Scheer met to explore other avenues to most effectively address the needs of the backyard gardener.

Among approaches considered was the concept of attracting and training volunteers to serve the urban audience. This appeared to be the most feasible option as it would free Gibby and Scheer from constantly reacting to public demand and allow them to be proactive in fulfilling educational needs. Recruitment would require a careful selection process.

An appropriate and distinguished title would also be necessary. As both Gibby and Scheer had worked in Germany acquiring language proficiency and understanding of the culture, they knew that Germans bestow titles for hard-earned proficiency levels in various crafts. The top proficiency level in horticulture is denoted by "Gartenmeister," which they anglicized as "Master Gardener." This title would be appropriate for volunteers who had received extensive training.

The volunteer concept was discussed many times before it was taken to various subject matter specialists at the Western Washington Research and Extension Center in Puyallup. The specialists initially rejected the idea of training volunteers.

To test the viability of the concept, Gibby, in 1972, organized a trial clinic at the Tacoma Mall featuring specialists to see if the public demonstrated interest in receiving gardening information. In preparation he wrote articles for the Tacoma papers and aired spots on television. The results were far better than specialists had expected. They were now convinced and committed to help train volunteers. Gibby was now able to take the project to the next level. In the meantime Scheer continued his work in commercial horticulture, but helped teach MG classes for the next 20 years.

Gibby had arranged for Steve Lorton, with Sunset Magazine, to cover the trial clinic. Lorton wrote an article for the Northwest edition under the caption “Wanted: Expert Gardeners to Become Master Gardeners.” There were about 600 initial inquiries. Gibby interviewed all applicants and accepted 300. **Recollections vary as to how many people were actually trained. A fair figure would be about 200. Ed Hume, media gardening expert, was an honorary trainee. He provided valuable help in advertising the program and continues to do so.**

**The next step was to develop a training curriculum.** Subject matter was to include culture of ornamental plants, lawns, vegetables and fruits; control of plant diseases, insects and weeds, and safe use of pesticides. Sessions were to be held eight hours per day, one day a week, for five weeks. At the end of training, volunteers were required to pass subject matter exams, as well as an exam for pesticide licensing by the Washington State Department of Agriculture. Master Gardeners were then committed to volunteering a specified number of hours working with the gardening public.

Faculty specialists from the WWREC Center and county faculty participated in teaching. The first training sessions in King County took place at the Renton Library, and in Pierce County at the Tacoma Grange Hall during the spring of 1973. Later that same year training was provided in the eastern Washington city of Spokane, making the new program a statewide endeavor.

Funds in the amount of \$500 were needed to stock the first clinics staffed by Master Gardeners, but Gibby’s application was turned down by University Extension administration. A second submittal written by Gibby, and signed by Arlen Davison, Extension Plant Pathologist at the WWREC, was eventually approved.

By the end of 1973 Gibby resigned from WSU to take leadership in ornamental nursery production with Weyerhaeuser Company. Sharon Collman, who had been working as program assistant with Gibby, became King County Extension Agent and continued managing the program for several years. She is credited with building a solid foundation for the program, as well as promoting and expanding it. She held the program together under the hardship of long hours during a time of budgetary constraints. She also helped other Extension offices establish Master Gardener programs in Washington and in other states. During this period the Pierce County program was ably guided by Nancy Hibbing, a program assistant.

About a year after Collman took over, Blair Adams (deceased) was hired to replace Gibby in the Area position. After Adams became the Extension Horticulture Specialist at the WWREC in Puyallup, George Pinyuh was hired in 1976 as his replacement and held this position until his retirement in 1994. Collman then concentrated on training Master Gardeners in diagnosis of plant problems and integrated pest management. These Master Gardeners, in turn, assisted in processing the increased volume of plant problem specimens arriving from the expanded number of clinics.

In the meantime Bernard Wesenberg (deceased), Extension Ornamental Horticulture Specialist at the WWREC, promoted the MG program nationwide and took on a significant coordinating role. Davison, by then State Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources Program Leader and later WWREC Superintendent, promoted the program within administration and was responsible for funding Program Assistants in various counties.

During the long tenure of George Pinyuh as Area Extension Agent (Faculty Excellence Award recipient), the program continued to expand in number of volunteers, number of plant clinics and new volunteer roles. He also established the individual Counties and State Master Gardener Foundations. The WSU Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Resource Center at the

University of Washington Center for Urban Horticulture is another Pinyuh accomplishment. He continues to teach MG volunteers and works at demonstration gardens.

Mary Robson, after five years of being a program assistant with Pinyuh, has held the Area Extension faculty position since 1994. She worked closely with Pinyuh to improve program efficacy and establish a good working relationship with the University of Washington.

It is not possible to name all who have made significant contributions to this program over the years. The list includes many faculty members and dedicated program assistants, who started MG programs statewide and deserve much credit. As time progressed, the program received the credibility and recognition it well deserved.

In order to better manage the urban horticulture educational efforts statewide, a Master Gardener Volunteer Coordinator position was funded. Van Bobbitt held this post from 1989 to 1998, attaining excellent results promoting the program around the state and building further support from WSU administration. The position is currently held by Rod Tinnemore, who assumed leadership in 2001 and is working hard to ensure program sustainability.

There are now 3100 volunteers across the state. They staff plant clinics in 105 communities at 171 locations. Each Master Gardener receives approximately 60 hours of training and gives back a minimum of 50 hours of free public service in horticultural assistance to his or her community. Some have served actively in the program for more than 20 years. They are grass-roots educators who extend the service of the University to more than 300,000 people each year.

The horticulture “Master” volunteer concept is so effective that it has spread throughout the United States and several provinces of Canada. It has been adopted by various other disciplines of University Extension such as food preservation, clothing and textiles, animal husbandry and resource conservation, e.g. Master Food Preserver and Safety Advisors, Clothing and Textile Advisors, Livestock Advisors, Master Composters, Beach Watchers and Waste Warriors.

\*Ex-Faculty and Faculty Emeritus, WSU Cooperative Extension, King and Pierce Counties