



Happy Volunteers and Thriving Units: Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Research Study

Executive Summary

Introduction

In the Virginia Extension Master Gardener (EMG) Program, there are a number of thriving units with volunteers who continue to be excited about local projects and their own efforts within the program over the years. This research project looked to uncover the factors at play within these successful units full of engaged, and generally satisfied, volunteers. What can we learn from these units and individuals to help strengthen all EMG programs across Virginia?

The two overarching questions of this research were:

- What makes a happy and productive Extension Master Gardener volunteer?
- What makes a thriving and productive EMG unit?

Focus groups and a survey of EMGs in Virginia were conducted as part of this research project. Eight select EMG units from across the state participated in the focus groups. Information collected in the focus groups was used to build a survey to collect additional information from

active volunteers. 1,327 volunteers completed the online survey, 25% of Virginia's 5,287 Extension Master Gardener volunteers active in 2021.

The mission, vision, and values of the Extension Master Gardener Program in Virginia underpin all the work that we do at the state and local level.

- **Mission:** Sharing knowledge. Empowering Communities.
- **Vision:** To be the VCE volunteer organization extending horticultural and environmental outreach across the Commonwealth.
- **Values:** Respect, Accountability, Collaboration.

Internal Motivation

The foundational piece of fulfilled and happy Extension Master Gardener volunteers is that their time with the program satisfies their personal needs. These internal motivating factors include:

- ❖ **A desire to learn:** Volunteers join an EMG program because of an interest in the material being taught and the associated opportunities around that. Many volunteers consider themselves lifelong learners and want the opportunity to expand their knowledge and continue on their path of learning and growing.

"The Master Gardener program feeds my inner student by allowing me to learn about horticulture and pass on that knowledge."

- ❖ **Use of knowledge, skills, and abilities:** All volunteers come to an organization with knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) that they can harness and share with the program. The opportunity to use their KSA is another motivating factor for many volunteers. Volunteers' KSA should be identified and valued by organizational leadership.

"A lot of our unit's success is due to professional people who have brought skills into the group."

- ❖ **Feeling valued:** Recognition of the impact volunteers play in their unit and ensuring that each volunteer feels appreciated for their time and contributions were all found to be important factors related to individual personal needs.
- ❖ **Accessibility:** In order to recruit and retain volunteers, an emphasis should be placed on ensuring that the program is open and accessible to all. This accessibility piece looks at diversity of all kinds, including race, ethnicity, age, gender, and work status. It is important for a new volunteer to be able to see themselves reflected in the program and feel like they have a place there.

- ❖ **Inspiration from others:** A final internal motivating factor that came through in the research is that volunteers are motivated by their interactions with other engaged volunteers. If others are enthusiastic about the work, other individuals are more likely to find projects and continuing education topics that make them feel the same. Enthusiasm inspires others to be enthusiastic and engaged too.



Master Gardener trainees get practical experience working in the Giving Garden, Franklin County Master Gardeners

Group Dynamics

Extending outward from the internal motivating factors of happy and productive volunteers are the relationships and community built around the EMG volunteer group. Thriving units are sustained by and built of fulfilled volunteers. Within group dynamics, the primary influencing factors found throughout the research study are:

- ❖ **Camaraderie:** Extension Master Gardener volunteer programs are not just in place to serve and educate the community. They also act as a place for individuals to find and build relationships with people who share their same interests. EMG programs offer a place for social engagement and an opportunity for volunteers to make new friendships. The study also found that there is value in being able to work together with others to take on projects, tackle challenges, collaboratively problem solve, and work toward the same goals with others.

"I feel as though I found my folks - fellow gardeners and like-minded people committed to sustainability of our planet. It makes me feel part of a bigger thing."

- ❖ **Unit leadership structure:** The internal leadership structure plays an important part in whether a unit will thrive even when facing challenges. Collaborative leadership from Extension agents or volunteer coordinators was shown to be an important factor throughout this study. Volunteers who saw their agent as available, supportive, and willing to listen felt valued, appreciated, and ready to continue to engage and support the work at hand. Local EMG associations also play an important part in the leadership structure for those units who have them in place. Associations can provide additional opportunities for education, camaraderie, and leadership for individual volunteers. Whatever the structure of local unit leadership, it is crucial that the leadership value and appreciate volunteers, are willing to listen and work with the volunteers, and that they see the volunteers as an important part of their team and their work.

"I find that because our agent is so proactive and always encourages new projects, that no matter what your strengths are, you are valued by the unit."

- ❖ **Recruitment and retention:** Recruitment is an important part of any volunteer group. New members bring new ideas, community connections, skills, and knowledge. Bringing in new people and meeting their needs as a volunteer can help strengthen the program. Our study found that the earlier we can engage new volunteers in the EMG group and in volunteer opportunities, the more engaged they'll feel in the long run and the more likely they are to continue as a volunteer. Mentorship programs during the training class are one way that units can begin to integrate new volunteers into the group. Another piece of recruitment and retention that surfaced is that the organizers of training and the program need to place an emphasis on diversity and work to build a program that is inclusive and accessible to all. If a potential volunteer doesn't see themselves represented in the program, they may not stay as long or want to be as engaged as a volunteer who does see themselves represented. Valuing these forms of diversity and working to increase program accessibility to all can help build thriving units.

"I think that building social connections is the foundation for any volunteer group. These social connections help keep volunteers engaged and a part of a meaningful group."



EMGs help place a bench in memory of EMG Larry Haun at the Belle Grove teaching garden, Northern Shenandoah Master Gardeners

Engaging with the Community

Moving beyond the local group's dynamics, we move toward one of the priorities of the EMG volunteer program: engaging with local communities to educate and empower its citizens. The opportunities volunteers have to engage with their local community and the quality of those opportunities was shown to be an important piece of thriving units.

- ❖ **Achieving the mission:** Engaging with and educating the community on horticultural and sustainable landscape and gardening management topics is at the heart of the EMG volunteer program. Achieving this mission of the program simultaneously allows volunteers to use their knowledge, skills, and abilities to have an impact on the larger community. How effectively a unit communicates, builds partnerships, and disseminates information can help increase the level of engagement for volunteers. Thriving EMG units are visible in the community and recognized for their good work and ability to help community members.

"Everything we do is fulfilling our educational mission."

- ❖ **Flexibility:** There are many ways to engage with the community and subject matter for volunteers. However, this study found that it is crucial for opportunities to be flexible and accessible to all EMGs, not just those who are able to take on projects during weekdays. Flexibility allows volunteers to more easily complete their required volunteer hours and engage in projects that they are passionate about. Once volunteers connect with projects they're excited about and can take some level of ownership in, they will continue to engage and be happy with their time invested as an EMG volunteer.

"Any type of service you might be interested in, we offer it in one way, shape, or form."

- ❖ **Volunteering:** Volunteers join Extension Master Gardener programs not just to meet like-minded people, but to give back and engage with their community. It is important to provide opportunities that can meet both volunteers' needs and community needs. Fulfilling both will help ensure that volunteers stay engaged and are happy with their time as an EMG. Extension Master Gardener volunteer programs can help local Extension offices extend their reach and increase their impact when managed with the volunteers in mind.

"Community education, children's education... attracts and inspires members."



Outreach Booth Bugfest Youth got to know a Rolly Polly up close as well as the value of other insects like pollinators, York Poquoson Master Gardeners

Environmental Sustainability

The Extension Master Gardener volunteer program is one rooted in care for the environment, a love for the outdoors, and an interest and appreciation for plants and horticulture. Throughout this study, environmental issues were mentioned by many as important to them, from their own personal learning and continuing education efforts to how they want to engage with the community as an EMG volunteer. When unit leadership places an emphasis on environmental stewardship, it is easier for EMGs to get involved and feel like they are making a difference in their community. As our climate continues to change, EMGs are in a place where they can make a difference and bring about change through community education and outreach.

"What inspires me most is the importance of our educational mission in this time of climate change and species decline."



Shoreline Garden at the Reedville Fishermen's Museum, Northern Neck Master Gardeners

Conclusion

"For me, becoming a Master Gardener meant bringing to light my great passion for the environment and leadership qualities I didn't know I possessed."

This research study has helped us better understand the factors that ensure fulfilled volunteers and thriving Extension Master Gardener units. From internal individual needs to building positive relationships and connecting to the greater community and environment, there are many layers to ensuring volunteers are happy, engaged, and thriving within our programs. Better understanding these factors and how they influence individual volunteers, local group dynamics, and overall outreach can help program leadership bolster their programs and sustain a successful and engaged volunteer base into the future.

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