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VIRGINIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Happy EMG Volunteers & Thriving EMG Units



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	i
Motivations.....	i
Goals	i
Design of the Research	i
Focus Groups	ii
Survey	ii
Observations and Implications.....	iii
Timeline Summary	iii
Plan for Dissemination of Information.....	iii
The Research Team	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PART I – Focus Groups – Qualitative Methodology.....	1
From Focus Groups to Survey.....	2
PART II – Survey – Quantitative Methodology.....	2
PART III – Observations and Implications - Initial Findings	3
Additional Introductory Notes.....	4
#1. ENGAGEMENT	5
PART I – Focus Group	5
PART II – Survey.....	6
Mentoring	7
Volunteer Hours	8
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	9
#2. FULFILLMENT	12
PART I – Focus Groups	12
PART II – Survey.....	13
Engaging in Community Service.....	14
Environmental Concerns	15
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	15
Learning Opportunities	15
Engaging in Community Service.....	16
#3. EXPERIENCE and EXPERTISE	18
PART I – Focus Group	18
PART II – Survey.....	19

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities	19
Speakers Bureau	20
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	21
Speakers' Bureau	22
Gardening Expertise	22
Culture.....	23
Small opportunities – with encouragement.....	23
Guidance that starts during the training class	23
Invitation.....	24
#4 EDUCATION.....	25
PART I – Focus Groups	25
PART II – Survey.....	27
Continuing Education Requirement.....	27
Community Education.....	28
Plant Sale.....	29
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	30
Continuing Education.....	30
Community Education.....	32
#5 TEAM SPIRIT	36
PART I – Focus Groups	36
PART II – Survey.....	37
Social Engagement and Camaraderie.....	37
New Volunteers Getting Involved	38
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	38
Proactively Engaging New Recruits	39
#6 ORGANIZATION	41
PART I – Focus Group	41
PART II – Survey.....	42
EMG Unit Associations or No Associations	42
Units with or without a Coordinating Agent.....	44
Units with Coordinating Agents.....	44
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	45
#7 COMMUNICATION.....	49
PART I – Focus Group	49
EMG Units' Internal Communication	49
External Communication.....	50
PART II – Survey.....	51

Internal Communication	51
External Communication.....	52
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	52
Internal Communications	53
External Communication.....	53
#8 INVOLVEMENT	56
PART I – Focus Group	56
PART II – Survey.....	57
Personal Engagement	59
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	60
Recruiting and Retention	60
People leaving the EMG Program	61
Involvement beyond the local unit	61
#9 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS	63
PART I – Focus Group	63
PART II – Survey.....	64
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	67
Leadership	67
Strategic planning	67
Volunteering.....	68
#10. ENVIRONMENT	70
PART I – Focus Group	70
PART II – Survey.....	70
PART III – Observations and Implications.....	71
Appendix A Getting Started: Overview for MG Research Project Phase I –	
Focus Groups.....	74
Content Goals for Focus Groups:	74
Some things the Focus Groups are not:	74
Procedure	75
Results.....	75
Phase II – Surveys.....	75
Appendix B Virginia Master Gardener Research Project Focus Group	
Questions	76
Personal	76

Professional	76
Break.....	76
Unit Activity	76
General	76

Appendix C Survey of all Virginia EMG Volunteers Conducted mid-summer, 202177

Extension Master Gardener Research Study.....	77
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Appendix D Virginia Extension Master Gardener Demographic Information86

Q50 - Age.....	86
Q51 – Gender	86
Q52 – Employment Status.....	86
Q53 – Race.....	87
Q54 – Rural or Urban Unit	87
Q55 – Size of Unit.....	87
Q56 – Volunteer Hours	88
Q57 – Unit Activity	88
Q58 – Ethnicity.....	88

Appendix E Mission, Vision, Values of the EMG Program89

Appendix F Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Units....90

Appendix G Code of Virginia - Title 2.2 Administration of Government Chapter 36. State of Government Volunteers Act93

§ 2.2-3600. Short title; declaration of legislative intent.	93
§ 2.2-3601. Definitions.....	93
§ 2.2-3602. Scope of chapter; status of volunteers; reimbursements.....	94
§ 2.2-3603. Responsibilities of departments.....	94
§ 2.2-3604. Solicitation of aid from community.	95
§ 2.2-3605. Volunteer benefits.....	95

Definitions97

PREFACE

Motivations

In the Virginia Extension Master Gardener (VA EMG) program, some units thrive and volunteers continue to be excited about their projects and their own volunteer efforts over time. There must be certain secrets that the always-lively units can share that others might incorporate to boost their own strength. A study of the characteristics and behaviors of the most successful units can be useful to all units of the VA EMG program.

Goals

Our goal in this research project is to answer two overarching questions:

What makes a happy and productive Extension Master Gardener volunteer?

Engagement of individuals: Why and how do individuals engage in their units and how do the units work? What motivates individuals to invest in their organization?

What makes a thriving and productive Extension Master Gardener unit?

Characteristics of units: What are the characteristics of the units that best engage individuals in their programs? How do differently organized units manage to meet their goals?

Initial results show the following:

A happy EMG volunteer is one who

- Feels he/she has something to offer and can offer it – feels valued
- Is able to stay engaged
- Finds the work of the unit to be challenging but doable

A thriving unit is one that

- Enjoys constant accomplishments
- Is recognized and valued by their community
- Enjoys connectedness within the group

Design of the Research

The Virginia EMG volunteers take great pride in their many, many wonderful projects, activities and contributions to community horticultural education and wellbeing. EMG volunteers are energetic and proactive in meeting the educational mission of the program. There are various ways the projects and outreach programs are recognized.

This study, however, focuses not on those accomplishments but rather on the personal practices and motivations of the volunteers themselves. What are the characteristics and conditions that draw them into the EMG fold and inspire them to contribute their time and energy toward the mission of the program? What keeps them engaged?

The information presented in this report comes from two sources: focus groups drawn from eight selected units and a survey distributed to all Virginia EMG volunteers.

Focus Groups

We asked each of eight EMG units to select 6-8 of their own volunteers to participate in the focus groups. The units were randomly selected from a larger group of highly productive units, based on a balance of these considerations:

- Large or small units
- Rural or urban units
- Units with and without associations
- Region of the state

The original plan was for these sessions to be conducted in person at their location. When COVID 19 interfered, all but the first one moved to Zoom. The research team agreed that Zoom focus group sessions were productive. The focus group questions are included as Appendix B of this document. Since we were looking at successes, we asked the focus groups to engage in appreciative research, telling us about the good aspects of their unit. They were allowed to include a negative only if their unit had found and implemented a great solution to the problem, and they were expected to focus on that solution.

Many other EMG units could have been contributors, but data points were most likely saturated after these eight focus groups met. We are most grateful to the participating units.

The focus group conversations were recorded and two people took notes during the conversation. The results were divided by question, and all the conversations about each question were considered together. We looked for common themes and those became the focal points of the summary. Once the focal points were established, information from all the groups was compiled, using as much language from the raw notes as possible. In addition, some direct quotes from focus group participants were inserted to help express the character of those conversations.

Survey

Information gathered from the focus group meetings was used as the basis for creating a survey to collect further information. Twenty-one survey questions represented two-three follow-up questions related to each of the eight categories discussed by the focus groups. The survey also included some demographic questions for use in analysis. The survey questions are included as Appendix C of this document.

The Virginia Extension Master Gardener Office created an electronic survey and distributed it to all VA EMG volunteers. The window for response was about one month long. Thirteen hundred volunteers completed and returned the survey.

While the focus group questions asked for positive responses, the survey questions were presented without any such prompt. The statistical information gathered from the survey is

presented in this report as gathered without prejudice. The responses have been cross tabulated to answer many questions that were of interest to the researchers. In addition, the demographics, used in the cross tabulations, are presented separately.

The comments offered by survey respondents were sorted by various topics and compiled into a narrative that follows the statistical information. The research team selected a few of the most striking comments to include in this report as direct quotes. Negative comments are not included in this report but may be used by the EMG office for other purposes.

The focus group information and the survey information are presented separately in this report because of the different ways in which they were collected. The focus groups were selected participants with a directive to focus on the positive. The survey participants were a general audience with no directive as to how to approach the questions.

Observations and Implications

The third section of each chapter provided an opportunity for the researchers to interpret their findings based on the information collected in the focus groups and through the statewide survey and to make recommendations for actions and considerations within the EMG program.

Timeline Summary

March 2020 through January 2021 – All focus group events held.

August 2021 – Surveys distributed statewide to all EMG volunteers.

May 2022 – First draft of the report completed.

Summer 2022 – Final report completed.

Plan for Dissemination of Information

April 2022 – Kathleen Reed and Dave Close – Presentation at National Extension Conference on Volunteerism, Tulsa, OK

June 2022 – Pat Lust - Presentation at VA Master Gardener College at VA Tech

Summer 2022 – full document available to VA EMG volunteers (Webpage, print document)

September 2022 – Kathleen Reed – Presentation at Extension Master Gardener National Coordinators' Conference, Savannah, GA

Other presentations as appropriate

Anticipated articles in professional journals to follow

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INTRODUCTION

“Learning more about gardening and then sharing it with others is probably the most satisfying part of being an MG.”

Beginning in March 2020, eight focus groups met to discuss the positive aspects of their units. These meetings were followed in late 2021 by a survey of the entire Virginia Extension Master Gardener (EMG) volunteer program. Information thus collected forms the basis of this report.

The focus groups consisted of six to eight active volunteers and were selected to represent a variety of EMG units (e.g., rural/urban, small/large). The subsequent survey questions were based on information gathered from the focus groups. Focus group questions appear at the end of this report as Appendix B, and the survey questions as Appendix C.

Each focus group discussed a series of eight questions. A key word in each following chapter heading identifies the topic of discussion and follow-up survey questions. Two additional chapters address additional considerations that arose as a result of this exercise.

These are:

- Engagement
- Fulfillment
- Experience & Expertise
- Education
- Team Spirit
- Organization
- Communication
- Involvement
- Other Considerations
- Environment

Part I of each chapter summarizes the conversations of the focus groups.

Part II of each chapter describes and analyzes the results of the survey that followed the focus groups. Surveys were distributed to all Virginia EMG volunteers.

Part III includes observations and implications related to the results reported in Parts I and II. This section will suggest potential actions in individual EMG units and the Virginia EMG program as a whole.

PART I – Focus Groups – Qualitative Methodology

Participants were directed to focus on “Appreciative Inquiry,” that is the positive work of their unit. Disagreements and problems were to be saved for another conversation, unless the participants’ unit had developed a successful solution to a problem that they wanted to share. Participants were asked to keep in mind two central questions as they answered the more specific questions in each category:

1. What makes a happy and productive Master Gardener volunteer?

Engagement of individuals: Why and how do individuals engage in their units and how do the units work? What motivates individuals to invest in their organization?

2. What makes a thriving and productive MG unit?

Characteristics of units: What are the characteristics of the units that best engage individuals in their programs? How do differently organized units manage to meet their goals?

The focus groups discussed eight questions arranged in four categories:

Personal (engagement, fulfillment)

Professional (experience/expertise, education)

Unit Activity (esprit de corps, structure, communication)

Involvement

Each question appears at the beginning of the chapter that it inspired and in Appendix B.

The focus group conversation proceeded as follows:

- Each focus group appointed a timekeeper to limit the discussion to ten minutes per category.
- A facilitator read the related question(s) of each category aloud.
- Discussion of that category ensued with minimum interruption from the facilitator.
- Two persons took notes, and each session was recorded.

Due to constraints imposed by COVID 19, seven of the eight focus groups were conducted on Zoom.

In Part I (the focus group part) of each of the eight chapters of this report, the narrative is broken down into several subcategories to make the material easier to follow. Direct quotes from the focus group participants are included in each narrative, both to add interest and to more clearly communicate the volunteers' insights.

From Focus Groups to Survey

While the focus groups were representative of the most active and productive units, the survey was sent to all EMG volunteers individually. The focus groups were instructed to consider only the positive aspects of their units, but the survey respondents were simply expected to answer each question without any particular prompt. Since these were two very different kinds of audiences, the responses from the focus groups and the surveys have been separated into "Part I" and "Part II" in each of the chapters.

PART II – Survey – Quantitative Methodology

Information collected in the focus groups informed the design of the survey: *What did focus group members mention that we wanted to delve into more deeply?* The survey included two or

three follow up questions for each of the eight categories discussed by the focus groups. The information collected through the survey is summarized in this report, and many questions are cross tabulated to provide further insights into the thinking of the respondents. The survey questions are included as Appendix C.

EMG survey takers began with the following question: Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with your involvement in your Extension Master Gardener (EMG) Unit? This was their response:

Extremely satisfied	54.4%
Somewhat satisfied	34.8%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	5.5%
Somewhat dissatisfied	4.7%
Extremely dissatisfied	0.6%

Most of the comments entered with this survey question have been moved to the following chapter where they were more relevant. We saved just three quotes for this introduction to begin our discussion of what makes a happy EMG volunteer and a thriving EMG unit:

“For fifteen years I've been a member of the Bedford Area Master Gardeners. I couldn't ask for a more generous group of friends as we share info with one another. We navigated through the past year on Zoom, but missed meeting together. We look forward to in person meetings again one day soon.”

“There are numerous and various opportunities to be useful, but also to learn.”

“I like having the flexibility to choose from different projects and not having the pressure to work on things you don't want to”

This study is intended to identify the qualities and conditions that make a happy EMG volunteer and a thriving EMG unit. Negative comments and complaints have been filtered out except for a few that were reimagined from the positive side.

PART III – Observations and Implications - Initial Findings

In this section the research team brings together the two major components of the mixed-methods design of this research. The review and analysis of the information and data gathered in Parts I and II described above provided a rich basis for observations and interpretations related to each topic in this study.

Part III of each chapter includes comments and recommendations for EMG practitioners (both volunteers and coordinating agents) for improving EMG unit activity and more skillfully engaging the volunteers. The research team has suggested focal points and questions for EMG volunteers to consider as they set out to energize their units and deepen their own participation.

Additional Introductory Notes

Coordinating Agents: The 60-some EMG units in Virginia are organized in a variety of ways. The main connection between the EMG unit and the state EMG office may be the local extension agent, a volunteer coordinator, a paid coordinator, the district director, and in some cases a combination of these. The term “coordinating agent” will be used throughout this report in a rather generic way to include all the above ways in which Virginia EMG units are organized. A cooperative, collaborative relationship between the state EMG office and the coordinating agents is necessary for the success of the EMG program.

Diversity: The way that we use the word diversity in this report reflects every aspect of the word: diversity of opportunities, diversity of thought, diversity of approaches to how things are managed and handled, etc. When we use that word there are many ways in which it brings value to what we are discussing and doing. The state EMG office has just concluded another study – Taskforce on Accessibility and Connections (TAC) – that delved further into the critical issues of ethnic and racial diversity, and that report is available [online](#). (on the EMG Webpage, under “Current Extension Master Gardeners” and then under “Strategic Planning and Annual Reports.”)

Diversity looks different across the state, from one EMG unit to another, and each will go about addressing the issues in different ways. It is important for the state EMG office to be inclusive when talking about diversity. It’s not just racial, but it’s age, work status, community partners and a lot of other things, as well. It’s what types of programs EMG units are doing in their communities. Some units like to stick to the same few programs and are very attached to those, but our goal is to adapt and change, as our communities adapt and change. Diversity of programming is often just as important as the other kinds of diversity.

#1. ENGAGEMENT

Successful Factors, Inspirations and Strategies.

“Our unit does a good job of bringing out the best.”

PART I – Focus Group

This section is based on the focus groups’ responses to the following questions:

- What is it about your individual Master Gardener program that inspires and excites you the most?
- What are the strategies for engaging volunteers (especially new volunteers) in specific projects/programs?
- Do you feel that your work is valued? Why? Why not?

Camaraderie. When asked to talk about engagement in the EMG unit, most focus groups lead with words like “camaraderie” and “friendship.” Many volunteers join EMG to meet new people, and some remarked about the importance of feeling welcome immediately. One even called it “proactive friendship.” Socializing events are central to this, and one-to-one contacts are important to keeping folks engaged. Contacting people personally is the best way to get them involved in projects. *“When you know someone, you’re more likely to say yes.”* One person suggested that their organization seems to have a great sense of humor.

Like mindedness. Many gardeners are attracted to and get engaged in the work of the EMG program because they like to hang out with like-minded individuals. Volunteers can get to know each other’s common interests, and, in sharing knowledge and experiences that individuals bring, they enjoy interesting and inspiring exchanges. At the same time, their diverse social and educational backgrounds bring a richness of new thinking into the horticultural conversation.

Opportunities for learning. Gardeners are always looking for ways to expand their horticultural knowledge and learn new things. The training class is a centerpiece of the Master Gardener program, and many volunteers attend classes again long after they have completed their internships. Though a few EMG volunteers come in without garden experience, most bring one or several areas of expertise. One of the most noted pleasures of the continuing education of a master gardener is the opportunity to learn from each other and to help others in learning new horticultural skills. One commented about being *“.... inspired by how knowledgeable everyone is.”* Another quoted someone as saying, *“I think I’m going to try what she’s doing.”* Participants noted their appreciation for knowledgeable, personable, entertaining speakers, and most recognized that their training classes included many excellent instructors.

Mentors. Mentoring came up in response to several of the focus group questions and will be mentioned again later in this report. Most participants agreed that a strong mentoring connection can be very important in getting new volunteers engaged, and being a mentor is an inspiration that helps keep some folks engaged. *“Our group has a lot of good mentors who are*

willing to share information,” and there are great rewards in watching others grow in the program.

Feeling valued. *“I always feel like my work is being appreciated.”* For successful long-term volunteer involvement, appreciation and feeling valued rank very high. The positive feedback from the community as well as from EMG colleagues is important. Volunteers want to be valued for their skills, for their differences, and for their contributions to the community, among other things. Volunteers’ support and mutual encouragement builds a common energy, or as one volunteer put it, *“Had an idea and spoke it. Good. You’re leading it.”*

Flexibility. A sense of encouragement to consider new ideas and to try new things is a powerful stream of energy for an EMG unit. This kind of thinking, along with flexible schedules and a minimum of limitations and requirements, fosters positive growth. Too many requirements limit participation. *“You’ve got to be flexible in seeing opportunities when they come up.”* More than one focus group participant mentioned the pleasure of moving from a unit with a lot of restrictions to one with more flexibility. An agent who is receptive to new ideas appears to be a key factor for these successful EMG units.

Projects. Many commented about the wide range of projects and how, with so many interesting things to do, it’s easy to get over-involved. An EMG volunteer can spend time in each of the projects and try things that are different from his/her prior experience. The projects can spark some of the best socialization among Master Gardener volunteers. *“Come on out, and we’ll have some fun in the teaching garden.”* Sometimes this extends to interactions with the community, such as talking with the residents at the nursing home project while managing their garden. Many volunteers are drawn to the teaching aspects of the projects. As most of the demonstration gardens are teaching gardens, it is fortunate that most EMG units include a fair number of volunteers with actual teaching experience.

Leadership. The quality of leadership cannot be overlooked as a factor in the successful EMG unit. In general, the focus groups indicated that for a well-organized group, strong support from the unit leadership and consistent leadership from the agents are essential.

PART II – Survey

In this section, content is based on the survey responses to these three questions:

- What excites and inspires you most about the EMG program?
- Does your unit have a mentoring program and how successful is it?
- Do your unit’s opportunities make it easy for you to meet the volunteer hours requirement?

(See Appendix C for full details of the questions.)

When asked the question “What excites and inspires you most about the EMG program?” survey respondents selected the following top 5 (+ 1 close 6th).

1. Working on projects I enjoy

2. Learning from other EMGs
3. Great lectures and workshops
4. Camaraderie / friendship
5. Opportunity to engage with the community
6. Conversations with like-minded people

In the comments attached to this survey question, the interpersonal aspects of EMG were prominent. One commented that, *“What keeps me involved is looking forward to working with the same people each week on my chosen volunteer project.”* Another person said that *“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.”*

The EMG program satisfies the need for many volunteers to be lifelong learners and teachers. The “Master Gardener program feeds my inner student by allowing me to learn about horticulture (without tests) and pass on that knowledge.” Other volunteers mentioned that EMG has led them to other opportunities, both professional and personal.

Mentoring

A little over half (56%) of survey respondents reported having a mentor assigned to them as they joined the EMG program. And, of that group, 83% rated their mentoring program as excellent or average.

92% of EMG volunteers who had a mentor and 86% of those who did not have a mentor reported a high level of satisfaction with their EMG units. Of the folks who indicated some level of dissatisfaction with their EMG units, 39% had a mentor and 61% did not.

The most often cited advantage of having a mentor were for answering questions and for making the new EMG volunteer feel welcome. Providing help to get involved with the unit’s projects was a distant third. Many folks commented that the mentorship relationship had developed into a friendship.

Having an association and/or a coordinating agent had little relevance as to whether a unit engages mentors. Volunteers from units without an association report only a slightly higher use of mentors than those from units that do have an association: 58% and 56% respectively.

Volunteers from units without a coordinating agent report a somewhat higher rate of mentor assignments than those with an agent: 53% and 47% respectively. It would seem to follow that without an agent or an association to pick up some of the slack, the mentor may become a more important.

According to the survey, mentoring makes no significant difference in whether an EMG volunteer will participate in state level EMG activities or other EMG activities beyond their own units.

For volunteers contributing 20-50 hours per year the numbers were split 50/50 on whether or not they had a mentor. The highest percentage of volunteers with a mentor, 64%, were those

contributing 50-100 hours per year. Fewer volunteers contributing more than 100 volunteer hours annually had mentors:

50-100 hours – 64% had a mentor
100-1,000 hours - 55% had a mentor
over 1,000 hours - 40% had a mentor.

Anyone who contributes over a thousand volunteer hours in a year is certainly a self-starter, and the involvement of a mentor may be less meaningful.

Volunteer Hours

The survey clearly confirms the importance of plentiful volunteer opportunities in making a happy Extension Master Gardener volunteer. Ninety percent of volunteers who found it was easy or very easy to find opportunities reported a high level of satisfaction. On the other hand, only 56% of volunteers who found it was difficult or very difficult to find opportunities reported a high level of satisfaction

EMG volunteers must contribute at least 20 volunteer hours per year to remain in good standing, and generally speaking, Virginia EMG units are doing a good job in providing opportunities for volunteers. 85% of respondents reported plenty of opportunities available, while only 7% reported having difficulty finding opportunities to meet the required hours. This breaks down as follows:

<u>Volunteers earning</u>	<u>say plenty of opportunities</u>
20-50	74%
51-100	93%
101-250	95%
251-1,000	99%
>1,000	100%

EMG associations appear to have a positive effect on volunteers' ease in meeting required hours. 87% of volunteers in EMG units that have associations and 80% of volunteers from units without an association report it easy or very easy to meet their required hours.

In looking at the relationship between having a coordinating agent and ease of meeting the required minimum volunteer-hour requirement, the results are a bit counterintuitive, but not substantially so. The following chart summarizes the results:

	Easy	Not easy	Difficult
With agent (1103 responses)	85%	8%	6%
No agent (114 responses)	90%	6%	4%
Not sure (74 responses)	74%	10%	15%

Meeting minimum volunteer-hours requirement

Information above shows that merely having a coordinating agent does not improve the EMG volunteer's opportunities to meet their requirement for service hours. When considering the level of involvement of the agent there is also little difference.

Reporting easy or very easy to meet volunteer hours

Agent very involved	86%
Agent somewhat involved	83%

The EMG program leaders often worry about having enough opportunities for volunteers who work full or part time. This study shows that 73% of volunteers working full or part time find it easy or very to meet the requirement, while 88% of retirees and volunteers who checked "other" on the survey find it easy or very easy to meet the requirements. Thirteen percent of working volunteers and 5% of retirees/other report difficulty in finding opportunities to meet the requirement.

While COVID complicated things, the leadership of some units met the challenge head on. They used it as an inspiration to develop new programs and to change the way they manage some others. Virtual meetings, virtual plant clinics, virtual lecture series, and all sorts of other virtual events have sprung up. The comments section of the survey revealed that virtual activity now accounts for many more volunteer hours than before and will likely continue to do so even after COVID is less of a deterrent to volunteering.

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

Flexibility: The focus groups stressed the importance of flexibility in their units. They felt that the flow and consideration of new ideas along with flexible scheduling and a minimum of restrictions were considerable strengths of their units.

The survey respondents, in their comments, suggested that most EMG units may need to think about mere flexibility in their programming. Flexibility in scheduling was a frequent concern with regard to community service projects, regular meetings, special events, etc. Of course, it is not possible to accommodate everyone's preference all the time, but it is important to make every effort to find the best answers to these questions. This leads to the observation of one focus group participant that flexibility "is important, since people leave due to inability to be active due to restrictive schedule."

In order to help make state programming more accessible and flexible, the state EMG office will begin to offer virtual state conferences every three years. This allows those who aren't able to attend in person for a multi-day conference to join virtually, watch recordings, and still have a way to connect with their peers across the state.

A few respondents talked about requirements – both understanding them and meeting them. Several noted the difference in requirements as they transferred from one unit to another. And one respondent cautioned that "Too many requirements limit participation."

Training Classes: While the focus groups praised their training classes and each claimed to be the “best in the state,” the survey respondents expressed concern about the challenges of getting new recruits involved in their unit’s activities during the training class. Comments indicate that it is important to plan deliberate engagement for trainees not only for retention but also for setting the standard for excellence in the unit.

In some cases, trainees are sent into the internship without enough guidance. Once the connections to projects/programs are established during the class, there should be a plan to connect that work to work that will occur during the internship and ultimately flow into the ongoing work of the unit. The idea that volunteers need to feel valued permeates this whole study, and must be considered important for trainees and interns, as well.

EMG leadership – both coordinating agents and association leadership – should take notice of this advice coming from the survey-taking volunteers. The new recruits should be engaged earlier rather than later. Trainees can start volunteering as soon as they have completed some of the basics – botany, soils, risk-training, etc. - as long as they are working with an experienced EMG volunteer. Units who engage trainees earlier most likely struggle less with retention than units that do not.

Learning and Camaraderie: Throughout this chapter there is considerable intertwining of observations related to learning and camaraderie. In describing what is most inspiring and exciting about the EMG program, one volunteer said simply, *“What I really wanted was to expand my knowledge of gardening.”* On the other hand, another volunteer described the magic that happens when like-minded people get together in a learning situation as *“proactive friendship.”* While similarity in interests is a stimulating, unifying factor in the program, volunteers also *“have different interests, and when people get together, they talk and interests can expand for people, after learning about other topics.”*

Many volunteers conveyed their gratitude for the various opportunities for learning – both formal and informal. Most association meetings include a speaker, and in the words of one respondent, the *“Speakers were mind-boggling and entertaining... and the snacks”*

Participation in Projects: Number 1 in EMG engagement is *“working on projects I enjoy.”* There is a common core of projects that show up in most units – like demonstration/teaching gardens, plant clinics, help desks, farmers’ markets, speakers’ bureaus, plant sales, etc. Perhaps more interesting are the other projects that are unique to specific units and are designed specifically to meet the needs of their communities and in some cases are developed in cooperation with community partners – like gardening therapy, “Little Free Seed Library,” rain garden at a public school, and the shoreline program in the Northern Neck. The community-specific programs are of particular interest since one of the goals of the EMG program is to adapt and change as our communities adapt and change.

The projects provide the momentum for the EMG program. “We have a lot of projects and one can be busy all day every day if you want.” “Some people are so involved that they work almost like a full-time person. They help keep things going.” All projects should be evaluated regularly

to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of both the EMG unit and the community they serve.

The issues of individual differences and of being valued as human beings were woven through the discussions of the EMG units' projects. One respondent commended the *"Support from leadership and comrades in the garden"*

Mentors can provide a number of different benefits to a new EMG. They can help connect the individual to the EMG group and can help new EMGs integrate with the larger community by allowing new volunteers to learn about community and volunteer opportunities. Mentors can also help begin to build camaraderie and friendships within the EMG group and can be go-to people for questions and finding out information.

However, just having a mentorship program in place isn't enough to engage with a new volunteer or benefit them. That requires intention, time, and mentors who will follow through for more than just the first few training classes. Each person will need a different level of engagement and connection to their mentor: some may need a great deal of time and some may not want to engage at all. Each mentor should understand the needs of their mentee and work with them accordingly. Agents or coordinators should properly train the mentors to answer questions and share ways to help engage with the individual. Transfer EMGs from other counties or states may also benefit from having a mentor assigned to them upon the start of their time in the new program. This is a topic we hope units will continue to invest in and at the state level we will continue to build resources to assist units with creating strong mentor programs.

Whether EMG volunteers are learning new things as a cohort, working together on an approved project, or problem solving together, they demonstrate the learning theory known as "social constructivism." While not exclusive to adult informal education or learning, social constructivism holds that we all bring existing knowledge and experiences to our circumstances or situations. As we learn, we often build from existing knowledge jointly with others. When tackling problems that the group has not encountered previously, collective problem solving occurs when participants bring their individual knowledge and experiences to the task along with what the group has learned through their common training as EMG volunteers. Throughout the focus group and survey results are comments centered around satisfaction experienced by participants directly related to learning and working and solving together with like-minded individuals who come into the EMG volunteer program from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. It is an excellent illustration of social constructivism as a learning theory in action.

#2. FULFILLMENT

Personal Rewards and Engagement in Service

“Proud to be part of this organization.”

“This organization is a great way to offer service to the community.”

“I love learning and sharing my expertise with others.”

PART I – Focus Groups

This section is based on the focus groups’ responses to these questions:

- How does the MG program meet your needs to engage in service?
- How else is it personally rewarding?

Learning. The EMG program attracts people who want to expand their personal knowledge and seek continuous intellectual challenges. While volunteers are happy to contribute the skills that they bring to the organization, there is an especially high enthusiasm for learning new skills and expanding their understanding. Most report excellent learning opportunities and meaningful learning experiences provided by their units. One person was *“Surprised at how much I actually learned,”* because I *“thought I would be teaching instead of being about half and half.”* Another reported engaging in *“a new career as an offshoot of being an EMG.”* EMG volunteers are lifelong learners! One mentioned learning how to ask better questions by working at the help desk.

Learning from each other is one of the strong points of the EMG program. *“Interests evolve and you finally find your spots.”* Volunteers get to know who has expertise in certain subjects and ask their advice when needed. *“Sometimes interns know more about certain subjects than older EMG’s do.”*

Personal growth. Besides increasing their knowledge and understanding in horticulture, volunteers report other personal benefits, such as finding new purpose in retirement and finding a better balance in life. For some it’s an opportunity to use talents and skills that were not applicable or recognized in their earlier careers. One volunteer reported, *“doing a lot of things I never had to do before”* and enjoying it.

While many join the program as experienced gardeners, the breadth of the program provides an abundance of learning opportunities for everyone. *“There are so many things to do, and I can choose the things that interest me.”* *“I like to give talks, and this is an opportunity. I also like to do the research.”*

And the volunteers have fun learning and teaching.

Inspiration and Motivation. It’s great to be in the presence of people doing big things and people willing to try new things. When everyone gets involved, everyone gets motivated. *“Anyone can offer an idea and it will be heard.”* The enthusiasm is enhanced when projects

originate from the volunteers themselves. Our group has “lots of spark plugs.” When projects come from within the group, it is so much fun watching the excitement grow. *“The bar for excellence just keeps rising.”*

Teaching. Many Master Gardener volunteers have some or a lot of teaching experience and appreciate the opportunity to engage with people and to be helpful. For former teachers and other volunteers, sharing knowledge and watching others learn brings considerable excitement to the job. It is especially rewarding for volunteers when neighbors ask them for help with their horticultural questions and they are able to respond positively. Some mentioned the strength of their mentoring programs and the enjoyment of contributing to their interns’ horticultural education.

Several units take great pride in their programs working with kids, especially in being able to get children outside for meaningful activity. *“Need to expose children to the dirt at an early age.”* And, *“Teaching science to 10-year-olds is actually fun.”* One MG got a letter from a twelve-year old saying that his talk had influenced her to consider becoming an entomologist.

Community service. Since most of the EMG projects have an educational outreach intent, volunteers see themselves as being in a community service position. Service work and helping people is not only fulfilling but also a lot of fun. It is exciting to watch new gardeners grow in their knowledge and skills. Most participants feel that their work is valued by the community, and they are encouraged by that. *“Any type of service you might be interested in, we offer it in one way, shape or form.”* *“Excellent training materials and resources have helped me be a better gardener. Now I can share.”*

Environment. Master Gardener volunteers are keenly aware of environmental issues, even though most projects are not specifically targeted to that. One volunteer made a strong case for care of the environment being his hook for wanting to get involved in the EMG program. *“Going back to the land”* seemed a real calling for some of the respondents.

Friendship. Friendship, important in the conversations about “engagement,” emerged as an important factor in the conversations about “fulfillment.” Meeting new people with common interests cannot be overlooked as a significant factor in the EMG program. The term “like-minded” almost became a theme in these conversations. Several units talked about seeking out and valuing interns not only for the work they do but also for the new friends that they would be. *“It’s great to combine learning and gardening with a wonderful group of people.”* Many EMG volunteers take pride in recruiting others to join the program and in making friends as they engage with members of the community. And *“Sometimes you just need to divide and give away plants.”*

PART II – Survey

This section is based on the EMG survey responses to these questions:

- What do you find to be personally most rewarding?

- How does this program meet your need to do community service and to give back to the community?

(See Appendix C for full details of the questions.)

Choosing from a longer list suggested through the focus groups, survey respondents identified these as the top six EMG benefits and opportunities that they find most rewarding:

1. Learning opportunities, expanding horizons (1033 respondents)
2. Opportunities to volunteer in areas of interest (857 respondents)
3. Helping the environment (755 respondents)
4. Developing new skills (614 respondents)
5. Finding purpose in retirement or outside of the workplace (573 respondents)
6. Getting outdoors (542 respondents)

The comments box associated with this question contained a significant expansion of the third item above, helping the environment. Most indicated that the EMG program could certainly do more in that area and expressed a healthy optimism that we will. Responses indicate a growing interest in native plants and other climate-conscious gardening practices.

EMG volunteers enjoy being helpful. One volunteer mentioned the pleasure in “translating scientific information into hands-on assistance --as in working the 'Help Lines', demo plots, timely exhibits at local events, school gardens, etc.”

Engaging in Community Service

When asked the question “How well does the EMG program meet your need to engage in community service and to give back to the community?” 95% of survey respondents selected “very well” or “adequate.” When matched with the question about how easy it is to earn the minimum number of required volunteer hours, there were no surprises. Volunteers who found it easy to engage in community service also found it easy to earn the minimum number of required volunteer hours. Some of the comments clearly put the burden on the volunteers, *“There are lots of opportunities, if you take advantage of them.”*

One question in this survey asked about opportunities to use previous knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) that volunteers brought when they joined the EMG volunteer program. When that question was compared with another about opportunities to engage in service, there is an interesting outcome.

- 72% of those who said that they are **able to use their previous KSA** also rated the opportunities to engage in community service to be “very good,”
- 29% of those who **would like to contribute more of their previous KSA** rated the opportunities to engage in community service to be “very good,”

For units seeking to improve their outreach programs, this may be a good point to consider.

The comparison of volunteer hours contributed with the rating of their unit's ability to provide opportunities for volunteers to meet their need to engage in service and give back to the community shows no real surprise:

- 20-50 hours 92% "very well" or "adequate."
- 51-250 hours 98% "very well" or "adequate."
- Over 250 hours 99% "very well" or "adequate."

Volunteers describing their units as "very active" reported the highest level of their unit's ability to meet their need to engage in service and give back to the community:

- Very active units 98% "very well" or "adequate."
- Moderately active units 92% "very well" or "adequate."
- Not very active 62% "very well" or "adequate."

The survey showed that age and gender made very little difference in a volunteer's ability to meet their need to perform community service. There was a noticeable, but very small, difference between retired and full-time working volunteers. 92% of volunteers who work full time and 96% of retired volunteers reported that the program meets their need to engage in service "very well" or "adequately."

Having an association did make a difference in the EMG volunteer's ability to meet his/her need to engage in community service and give back to the community. 68% of volunteers from units with an association reported that their unit's program met their need to provide service "very well" as opposed to 58% of those from units without an association.

Environmental Concerns

The subject of the environment emerged in the focus groups as part of the discussion of "Fulfillment." As a result, a follow-up question was included in this section of the EMG Survey, and survey-takers provided a lot of information. In addition, comments in most sections of the survey included some related to the environment.

In response to the rich survey results and the heightened interest in environmental issues in the state EMG office evidenced at the International Master Gardener Conference in September 2021, the research team decided to remove the topic from this chapter and address environmental concerns in Chapter 10 of this report.

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

Learning Opportunities

When we asked survey takers what they found to be the most personally rewarding about the EMG program, the clear winner was "Learning opportunities, expanding horizons." Elsewhere in the survey we learned that most volunteers were easily able to meet their continuing education

requirement because their units provide ample opportunities. With the recent rise in webinars, the opportunities seem almost limitless.

Both the qualitative and quantitative results show that Virginia EMG units are doing a great job in providing learning opportunities for our volunteers. Keep up the good work!

Engaging in Community Service

One of the questions that EMG units ask (or should ask) as they interview prospective trainees is about their experience and interest in volunteering. Most continuing EMG volunteers are eager to be contributors in their communities, and most feel that the projects and programs of their units provide ample opportunities to do so.

The survey results above showed that there is a significant connection between a volunteer's ability to use their previous knowledge, skills and abilities and their opportunities to engage in community service. For those who indicated that they can use their previous KSA, 72% said that they have ample opportunities to engage in community service. For those who indicated that they would like to contribute more of their previous KSA, only 29% said that they have ample opportunities to engage in Community service. Unit leadership should take note of this significant disparity.

Further Considerations

Ascertaining a volunteer's KSA is not always easy, but these survey results indicate that a unit would benefit by making it a priority. Some information about the new recruits can be learned during the training class, and mentors can be instrumental in developing a broader understanding of their talents. A few volunteers may want to leave their former talents behind, but over 90% indicate that they are eager to contribute their previous knowledge, skills and abilities to the EMG program. As noted elsewhere in this report, a few will step right up, and others will need a little encouragement.

How well do you and your volunteer leaders know the local EMG volunteers individually and collectively? What is being done practically to capture and highlight the knowledge, skills, and abilities each is bringing to the local program before they are trained as an EMG volunteer? How are individual and collective knowledge, skills, and abilities being leveraged from the beginning as trainees and interns initially engage? Acknowledging and recognizing individuals for what they know and can do makes them feel valued and appreciated. If you are creating a culture and environment where people feel valued as soon as they walk through the door, you are more likely to retain them longer than the average volunteer. Learning about the people who seek to be trained and become volunteer community educators takes effort and time and must come from a place of sincerity and genuineness.

In order to understand what fulfills EMG volunteers, it is necessary to understand what motivates them as well. Just like taking time to learn about the individuals coming into your program, it requires deliberate effort to learn what motivates EMG trainees, interns, and volunteers. When time is invested in understanding the basics of what motivates people to

volunteer, it is easier to understand how motivation relates to fulfillment. When you identify the source of fulfillment, you can employ some specific strategies or activities to increase the likelihood of local volunteers walking away from a project feeling satisfied and fulfilled. Happy volunteers, who consistently feel fulfilled, are motivated volunteers. Happy and motivated volunteers are retained volunteers. Happy, motivated, retained volunteers lead to greater community impact which hopefully translates into improved community conditions.

Several articles in the Journal of Extension and HortTechnology address volunteer motivation and retention within the Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program. As noted by responses captured from the focus groups and survey results, volunteers who value the training they receive while becoming an EMG volunteer experience increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. Those traits are further reinforced as they work with experienced EMG volunteers. Volunteers with higher confidence in their skills as EMG volunteers provide increased local capacity at it relates to knowledge of consumer horticulture. This increased capacity can lead to greater impact locally and statewide.

#3. EXPERIENCE and EXPERTISE

Knowledge, skills, and abilities

“Expertise influences choices of speakers, and we use our own people when we can.”
“...forced me to educate myself more.”

PART I – Focus Group

This section is based on the focus groups’ responses to the following questions:

- Are your knowledge, skills and abilities an important part of the work of your unit?
- Does your unit generally recognize the knowledge, skills and abilities that volunteers bring to your unit?
- As part of their continuing education do volunteers pursue advanced knowledge in specialized areas? If so, through what means?

Speaking/teaching. Many volunteers bring valuable experience into the organization: toastmaster, teaching, etc. Many volunteers love teaching and relish the opportunity to get into the community to share horticultural knowledge and experiences. The speakers’ bureau plays a big role in some units, not only in the outreach to the community but also in providing speakers for association meetings. Robust engagement of a unit’s own volunteers for continuing education programs can be a point of great pride. *“Expertise influences choices of speakers, and we use our own people when we can.”*

Unit (Association) Leadership. The EMG volunteer program offers plenty of opportunities for leadership. Most volunteers have spent many years in professional careers, and they bring a great wealth of leadership and organizational skills to the program. Most are willing to offer that expertise to the MG program.

Getting to Know Others’ Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities. Each year new volunteers bring unique sets of skills into the organization, and one of the most enjoyable parts of getting to know them is learning about their talents and interests. *“We’ve got a lot of talented people and sometimes it takes a few years for us to recognize it.”*

It is important for each unit to get to know and to call on the special skills that volunteers bring to the program. Some participants mentioned desirable assets such as certifications, multilingual skills, and a wide range of non-horticultural skills.

Appreciation and Recognition. It is important to celebrate EMG volunteers’ accomplishments. People need to know that their skills are appreciated, their knowledge is valued, and their expertise has real meaning for the organization. One unit has a gratitude section in their newsletter. Some units celebrate accomplishments at monthly meetings. Volunteers are energized when they feel they can say that their extension agent has confidence in them. *“You change behavior when people appreciate what you are sharing.”*

Generalists & Specialists. Most EMG-sponsored continuing education opportunities do not offer a deep dive, and there is usually not a formal path to developing expertise. Most volunteers prefer to remain horticultural generalists. *“I’d rather get questions over the phone, so I can look up answers before I go talk with them.”* However, some volunteers do actively develop expertise, especially in preparing for speaking engagements, plant clinics, special events and certain leadership opportunities. People dabble, then find their interests. Individuals are challenged to engage in additional research and pursue expertise in those areas of interest. *“MG prompted me to get online horticultural certification.”*

Learning. Master Gardener volunteers report *“learning from everything they do – learning as they go.”* Farmers’ markets were high on the list. In addition to answering questions on the spot, there is the preparation of special topics ahead of time and the follow-up to questions that need to be researched. Plant exchanges provide another opportunity to learn more about certain plants and then to provide explanations to others. Field trips are a popular means of engaging more volunteers in the pleasure of learning from the experience and from each other.

Researching is central to an EMG volunteer’s continuing education: research to prepare for speakers’ bureau talks, research to answer help desk questions, research to prepare for plant clinics, and so on. Focus group participants value their *“freedom to explore”* and the opportunities to do research. *“There is always so much more to learn.”*

Sharing. Some units have taken advantage of programs and materials developed by other units. Some units report collaborating with other units to develop materials and/or offer classes. The COVID challenge necessitated that Master Gardener volunteers step up to virtual learning practices and most did successfully. *“Necessity is the mother of invention, and we ‘Zoomed’ in on it.”* Most units report actually enjoying online classes

EMG volunteers love to work together, and everyone is eager to sign up. *“By the time I get to Sign-up Genius it’s already full.”* One unit cautioned that we must remember to make room for the interns.

PART II – Survey

This section is based on the EMG survey responses to two questions:

- As you learn new skills as an Extension Master Gardener, does your unit provide opportunities for you to use the knowledge, skills and abilities you brought when you joined?
- Does your unit have a speakers’ bureau and what is your involvement?

(See Appendix C for full details of the questions.)

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

The survey question does not define the parameters of “knowledge, skills and abilities” (KSA), and the interpretation is left to the respondents. Well over 90% of respondents indicated that they are eager to make use of their previous knowledge, skills and abilities as part of their

volunteer work with the EMG program, and most indicate that the projects and activities of their unit allow them to do so. A little over 13% of all EMG volunteers would like even more opportunities to use their previous experiences in support of the work of the unit.

When the question about KSA is compared with some of the demographic questions, age has minimal effect. The overall responses showed that 78% of all volunteers feel that they can bring their previous knowledge, skills and abilities into the work of their units, with those over age 80 and under 50 being a little lower than the overall. The responses, however, show no distinguishable differences regarding gender or ethnicity.

White volunteers report being able to use previous knowledge, skills and abilities at twice the rate that Black or African Americans do. An even more striking detail is that Black or African American volunteers indicate their desire to increase the use of their previous knowledge, skills and abilities at more than three times the rate of white volunteers. The EMG program in Virginia does not include enough volunteers of other races to make any further meaningful comparisons.

In the comments section folks identified some of the KSA that they bring to their unit: computer skills, interpersonal skills, leadership, IT, writing and speaking, biology or horticulture degree, administration or management, finance, marketing and social media, advocacy skills, and more. As one respondent said, "*We all have areas of expertise....*" The comments also indicate that many volunteers underestimate the value of the KAS that they do bring to the program.

Speakers Bureau

Of the many things mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the speakers' bureau is the only one included in this survey as a direct example of incorporating previous KSA. The survey did not ask how many EMG volunteers have experience as teachers, but we know anecdotally that there are quite a few. While this gives those volunteers an advantage in the speaking category, many others bring speaking experience or talents that can blossom as part of the EMG experience.

About two thirds of respondents indicated that their EMG unit does have a speakers' bureau. From that group one third indicated that they are not interested in speaking. Most others are either engaged in the speaking opportunities or would like to be. One third of respondents indicated that they have prepared and presented at least one topic for their speakers' bureau, and 10% of the respondents identify the speakers' bureau as one of their favorite programs in their EMG unit and note that they are available for multiple topics. Of particular interest may be the 24% of respondents from units that do have a speakers' bureau who are "interested but have not yet done a presentation."

The responses in the "other" category of the speakers' bureau question identify several implications for a unit's proactive leadership to consider:

- Some volunteers wait to be asked rather than stepping up.
- Some volunteers undervalue their own expertise.
- Some volunteers are not aware of the opportunities.

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

Experience – previous experience and expertise – Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSA)

The established knowledge, skills and abilities that folks bring into any volunteer organization are essential to the workings of that organization. *“A lot of our unit’s success is due to a lot of professional people who have brought skills into the group.”*

Focus-group participants noted that most EMG volunteers are generally quite willing to offer their previous knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) for the benefit of the EMG program, and 90% of survey respondents confirmed that opinion. This represents an incredible wealth of talent. *“I have been able to use my writing, researching, and organizational skills on a regular basis.”* Besides skills like those in technology, administration, writing, etc., survey respondents mentioned *“people skills which are very relevant.”*

“I would be happy to contribute to more in depth technical content, as appropriate.” Willingness on the part of the volunteers is not a problem, but the unit’s awareness of and ability to tap the available talent can be. So, the challenge is in finding out what KSA comes with each volunteer in order to provide opportunities for engagement whenever possible.

One focus group reported that during the entrance interviews for their program they ask all candidates what skills they have that they can contribute to the group. *“Knowing what people bring to the organization”* is important. Then there won’t be volunteers who say things like, *“I could probably add more to the program but don’t see many opportunities that are ‘out of the box.’”*

“We do need to learn more about our members ‘previous lives’ and how those skills may be valued by our unit.” How do you find out individual KSA? For starters, the application form can be constructed to find out a lot of information. Then, talk to trainees during the class, asking “who can do this, who can do that?” This challenges leadership and savvy volunteers to listen carefully to the answers. They will give you clues. *“I rely on my team and leadership skills as a volunteer, team member, and occasional project leader.”* Several survey respondents indicated that they would like to see their agents have a higher regard for *“the skills and knowledge volunteers bring.”*

The survey results showed that the percentage of minority respondents who would like to be able to make more use of their previous KSA as part of the EMG program was much higher than the percentage of white respondents who would. This is one of the most significant comparisons in the survey. As units look forward to improving accessibility and retention, finding ways to better incorporate the previous KSA of minorities should be an important part of the planning process. The numbers (listed in Part II) clearly indicate that there is significant talent just waiting to be tapped. EMG leadership and influential volunteers will want to be mindful of the results provided by the survey and always be on the lookout for opportunities.

Speakers' Bureau

From the many EMG projects/programs that draw on volunteers' KSA, the researchers chose the speakers' bureau as a convenient model for collecting information about how volunteers use and would like to use their previous KSA. The majority of Virginia EMG units do have a speakers' bureau, and it is one program/project that exhibits reasonable similarity from one unit to the next.

In the units with speakers' bureaus, a little more than a third of the volunteers participate in doing presentations, some occasionally and some frequently and enthusiastically. These volunteers can be some of the best representatives of the unit to the public and should be encouraged by association leadership. One volunteer mentioned being able to *"expand my knowledge and skills through participation in programs outside my comfort zone and the chance to research certain topics for presentation to the public."* Another commented: *"I am very interested in the origin of plants' names because I was a Classics major...a person who likes to do presentations, read and tell stories to children."*

About a third of the respondents indicated that they did not wish to be involved with their speakers' bureaus. It is important to be aware of and respectful of volunteers who are averse to public speaking. There are many other ways for volunteers to be active contributors to the educational mission, and good leadership will be able to guide folks to other suitable and fulfilling opportunities. *"They let me do what I am good at... both mentally and physically."*

Of the remaining third, most indicated some interest in preparing a talk for the speakers' bureau. This represents an enormous pool of willing talent to be tapped. Even though folks are willing, many will not step forward without some sort of encouragement from others. This encouragement can take many forms from simple engagement in conversations about the topic to a direct invitation from the leadership.

Gardening Expertise

In most of the focus-group conversations the participants claimed to be generalists, but within each group the volunteers talked with pride about the "experts" or "go-to" people in their units. It appeared that those participants had great respect for expertise but were hesitant to admit their own. Since nearly 75% of EMG volunteers are retired from a profession where they spent a lifetime developing their expertise, they are probably hesitant to claim their shorter-term "mid-level expertise" in a horticultural area. Further indication that EMG volunteers undervalue their own horticultural knowledge, skills and abilities became evident in the survey comments.

Most EMG volunteers do have particular areas of interest in gardening, and many of those interests can or do blossom into significant pockets of expertise. *"Once someone starts to do something, they will get asked to do more of the same, so it helps them hone their skills from the experience."* These pockets of expertise can be a goldmine for both the EMG unit and for the coordinating agent. How do we recognize and tap them?

Within the EMG program there is *“not a formal path to develop expertise in things.”* That requires individual initiative, and, as always, a little encouragement is a good thing. All volunteers should be encouraged and have the opportunity to develop their mid-level expertise, but not all will choose to do to. *“No one should be pressured to specialize. We need generalists, too.”*

Culture

Focus groups participants pointed out that most unit-sponsored continuing education does not lead to expertise, but they also pointed out their appreciation of *“freedom to explore”* and their understanding that *“doing the research”* is central to a volunteer’s own continuing education. Some ways that the unit leadership should be involved in developing a climate more friendly to encouraging development of individual expertise include the following:

- recognize and appreciate individual expertise as it exists and develops.
- cultivate a heightened understanding that EMG volunteers are “gardening educators.” (That’s what sets the EMG program apart from other gardening organizations.)
- acknowledge mid-level expertise as a good thing

Volunteers learn during the training class that if they don’t know the answer they can say, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out for you.” Units need to find ways to motivate volunteers to want to be the “go-to” volunteer or the “mid-level” expert on a particular subject

Small opportunities – with encouragement

Going from “I’m not sure, but I’ll find out for you” to giving a half-hour lecture on a particular subject, even if it is a favorite interest, does require considerable effort. Units need to find small projects to let volunteers grow into their mid-level expertise.” How about a 5-minute presentation or educational graphic at a farmers’ market? Or a 200-word tip on the unit’s Facebook page? Many similar opportunities exist.

Those who find pleasure in developing small bits of expertise can then tackle larger things like articles for the newspaper, speakers’ bureau, podcasts, videos, etc. And don’t forget to engage those who bring significant horticultural expertise into the organization – like the retired biology teacher or environmental scientist, etc. One volunteer commented, *“I was a science teacher which certainly helps in many gardening areas.”*

Guidance that starts during the training class

Recognize and document the trainees’ interests from the start. Perhaps encourage a brief presentation on his/her subject to the class followed by a slightly bigger offering in some manner during the internship. For volunteers who don’t like to do public speaking, there are lots of other ways of conveying a similar amount of knowledge to a public audience.

Invitation

“Volunteers who have some expertise and are just waiting for an invitation to do what they do...” Sometimes people really do expect to be asked to do things rather than stepping up and saying, “I could do that.” EMG leaders (coordinating agents, association leaders and savvy organizers in the unit) need to listen to what people say. Volunteers will give clues about their interests, and sometimes just a nudge from someone else will be the spark that gets them moving toward the next level of expertise. Volunteers (and all of us) like to be “invited” and to know that someone else is interested in their skills/knowledge. Once again, volunteers need to feel valued.

These are just a few ideas. Creative volunteers will find limitless other ways to identify and cultivate individuals’ expertise if that is important to the unit.

Furthermore, volunteers’ mid-level expertise can be quite valuable to extension agents. They all have very large workloads, and none of them can be expert at all the things they are expected to do. When they know they have “go-to” volunteers in certain areas, it can lighten their work load a bit. In the end, that’s why the volunteers are here.

To sum up – “encouragement” is the magic word. Leadership (both formal and informal), take note!

Further Considerations

Questions discussed in Chapter 2 include the following: what is the local EMG unit doing to uncover the pockets of ‘hidden’ expertise? What specific actions are you taking to leverage the existing knowledge, skills, and abilities folks bring with them to your local program? What are you doing to ensure all volunteers, particularly those coming from an underrepresented group within the EMG program, are given the opportunity to exercise their hidden expertise if they wish to do so, especially if they have historically not had a voice locally?

With respect to accessibility within the local EMG volunteer program, what is being done to create a culture of openness and welcome? If your local unit has 25% more volunteers who are willing to participate in your speakers’ bureau, why are they not involved or engaged in that project? What can you do to make sure those who want to participate have the opportunity to do so and are not running into any barriers to their involvement? Are you proactively holding spots on projects specifically for interns? Are you giving interns equal access and opportunity to experience the things that interest them?

#4 EDUCATION

Community Outreach and EMG Advanced Training

“Everything we do is fulfilling our educational mission.”

“I’m trying to think of something we do that doesn’t include education.”

PART I – Focus Groups

This section is based on the focus groups’ responses to this question:

- How does your organization fulfill the educational mission of the Master Gardener program?

Raison d être. Education is the foundation of the EMG program and a crucial part of every project and program in which volunteers participate. Focus group participants not only clearly understood this perspective, but they strongly emphasized its importance. They proudly stressed over and over that all projects needed to have educational outreach components. In addition, there is always some research and experimentation focused on improving their own understanding. They frequently mentioned the importance of scientific information and the latest research

Special events. The special events, like the Garden Faire, Gardenfest, annual garden tours and open houses at demonstration gardens are favorite focal points for both EMG volunteers and their respective communities. There is high participation in these kinds of events and one person commented that the *“events always sell out.”* For many units the *“Plant sale is big educational event for both community and members.”*

Demonstration Gardens. All focus-group units talked about their demonstration gardens with great pride and enthusiasm, noting that demonstration gardens are not only about beauty. They teach more than that, not only for the public, but also for the volunteers themselves. For example, in order to talk with the children visiting the pollinator garden, EMG volunteers found that they needed to learn more about insects.

Projects. Ongoing projects highlight EMG’s strong commitment to community education and provide strong links to the community. In addition to all the demonstration gardens and special events, one of the favorites seems to be the farmers’ market activities such as a booth that provides a topic of the week. One unit mentioned that they challenged their interns to renovate one of their EMG unit’s gardens.

“Every project needs an outreach component.” One unit discussed at length the process of reviewing their projects each year because *“Not all projects can last forever.”* And one unit reminded us that we need to ask, *“Does this project fit with the agent’s area of work?”*

Volunteers expressed some hesitation about tailoring projects to specialized audiences, such as children, Alzheimer patients, therapy initiatives, etc. Doing so may require additional training as

well as more hands-on or otherwise-different experiences and may create unique challenges for volunteers.

Community outreach. Most units boast of robust public education programs. These include articles, newsletters and other print and online materials presenting scientific facts, as well as less formal means, including social media. EMG volunteers love to draw community folks into their demonstration gardens, even when there is not a special event. Someone commented that *“we can do a lot without stepping on a podium.”* And another noted that, *“If you are educating the public, you are educating yourself because none of us are horticulturists.”*

Some EMG units have formed noteworthy collaborations with other agencies in their communities. One mentioned that agencies are *“so thrilled to have Master Gardeners working with them.”* Some have initiated programs for providing scholarships for high school students. One unit mentioned being involved with a sister city project internationally.

There is no question about the importance of community outreach to the EMG program. Several units mentioned evaluating and reevaluating their outreach programs and methods. One unit even brought in an outside consultant to help with formal strategic planning for good community outreach.

Social media. EMG units can reach a broad swath of the public through social media. Most have regular educational posts on Facebook (such as a Mystery Plant series), and many use neighborhood communication systems for dissemination of information. Sometimes this *“can have as much impact as in-person”*

Lifelong Learner. *“Everyone in the group is a lifelong learner.”* EMG volunteers take delight in learning as they go, finding new perspectives and opening new doors. Volunteers have access to very good resources and high-level experts, including their meeting speakers and field trips (or as one put it, *“adventures in education”*). There are many opportunities, and some volunteers find a niche or become *“specialty people.”*

One of the goals of the training class is to help new recruits understand that they don’t have to know all the answers. They just have to know how to find the answers. Many units use the help desk experience to train interns to ask questions and arrive at solutions.

Many EMG volunteers bring experience as educators, and others bring talents and healthy interests in teaching. These skills and enthusiasm are real assets to their units. And, sometimes volunteers’ offer their own personal gardens as educational venues.

PART II – Survey

This section is based on the EMG survey responses to three questions:

- How easy is it for you to achieve your required 8 hours of continuing education each year?
- What activities are important means through which your EMG unit provides community education/outreach?
- Does your unit have a plant sale?

See Appendix C for full details of the questions.)

Continuing Education Requirement

EMG volunteers generally find it easy to meet the 8-hour requirement per year of continuing education. 91% of survey respondents indicated that it is “very easy” or “easy.” Only 3% indicated that it is “difficult” or “very difficult.”

A comparison of the level of EMG program satisfaction with the reported ease in meeting required continuing education requirements revealed the following:

- 94% of volunteers who are satisfied with EMG program report ease in meeting the continuing education requirement
- 69% of volunteers who are dissatisfied with EMG program report ease in meeting the continuing education requirements.

Availability of continuing education opportunities may be a real positive point in the EMG program. Looking at the numbers from the opposite perspective, even 58% of the small number of respondents who found it difficult to meet the continuing education requirement still report being satisfied with the program.

To remain in good standing, EMG volunteers must complete at least 8 hours of continuing education and contribute at least 20 hours of service annually. The survey results indicate that it is somewhat easier for volunteers to meet the annual “8-hour continuing education requirement” than the “20-hour volunteer requirement.”

- 85% reported easy to meet volunteer hours
- 92% reported easy to meet continuing education hours.

When the two questions (continuing education and volunteer hours) were cross referenced, 95% of respondents who found it easy to achieve the required hours in one area also found it easy in the other area. On the other hand, 50% of the respondents who found it difficult in one area also found it difficult in the other area.

The volunteers who contribute the most time are the ones who find it easiest to get the required continuing education hours. Over 99% of the high contributors found meeting the continuing education requirement to be “easy” or “very easy.” And it’s no surprise that the volunteers in the most active EMG units find it easiest to meet the continuing education requirements

The presence of an agent does not seem to have much of an effect on the availability of opportunities for Continuing Education.

	Easy	Not easy	Difficult
With agent	92%	5%	3%
No agent	96%	2%	2%
Not sure	82%	8%	10%

Meeting minimum continuing education requirement

As to demographics, we found that age is not a significant factor in ease of meeting continuing education requirements, and women find it slightly easier, but only by 4%.

However, there is a noticeable difference when viewed through the lens of ethnicity with 71% of Hispanic or Latino volunteers saying that meeting the continuing education requirement is easy as compared with 93% of non-Hispanics saying the same.

The difference by race is smaller but still worth including. 93% of white volunteers indicate that it is “very easy” or “easy” to meet their continuing education requirements while 83% of Black or African American volunteers do so. When all nonwhite respondents are taken together, 85% report that it is “very easy” or “easy” to meet their continuing education requirements.

The proliferation of Zoom lectures and other online offerings during the COVID confinement made it much easier for some volunteers to meet their continuing education requirements. *“The pandemic, ironically, has made it easier to keep up with CE because of all the online content available.”* Those who mentioned Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden online classes highlighted the recent series on native plants.

Most units attach a continuing education component to their regular meetings. *“I can get all 8 hours just by attending the monthly Association Meetings.”* Some units advertise continuing education opportunities from other sources, such as Master Naturalists, and from other EMG units. Several volunteers suggested that they would like more advanced training rather than same repetitive programs. Annual Master Gardener College not only provides that “advanced” training but also enough continuing education to meet the whole year’s requirement in two days.

Community Education

Given a list of options and instructed to check all that apply, survey respondents ranked the choices as follows in terms of importance to their unit’s work in education of the community.

Help desk	88% of respondents
Plant sales	77%
Demonstration gardens	74%
Children’s programming	70%
Plant clinics	56%
Speakers’ bureau	56%
Written articles	55%
Social media educational content	48%

Garden tours	47%
Full-day or multiple-day events	47%
Hands-on plant workshops	41%

The list of choices in the survey of all EMG volunteers was created from prior focus group conversations. Survey respondents added some good suggestions to the list: state fair, seed exchanges and plant swaps, SMART lawns, home visits, habitat landscaping, website. While COVID has been an extreme challenge for the duration of most of this study, it has also given EMG volunteers the opportunity to develop new skills and find new avenues for providing community education.

The list, as reranked specifically for those who found it “easy to engage in serviceable to satisfy their need to give back to the community,” showed only one noticeable difference from the general list above: the speakers’ bureau moved ahead of plant clinics. The same result occurred when the list was reranked specifically for those who found it “easy to meet the required volunteer hours.”

Plant Sale

“To me this event speaks to the beginning of gardening season and we love to share it with the community. Great fun!”

82% (1,064 volunteers) of survey respondents said that their unit does have a regular plant sale, and they identified educational aspects according to importance.

EMG volunteers offering information to customers as they shop	82%
Answering questions about plants	80%
Signs with plant information	66%
Plants presented sorted in clear categories	65%
Tags in each pot with information	62%
Concurrent events (seminars, lectures, etc.)	28%

In addition to the list above that was generated through the focus groups, several other things rated well among volunteers who added comments in the survey:

- Educational programs for children
- Help desk, plant clinic or “Ask a Master Gardener” presence as part of the plant sale
- Focusing on information about native and invasive plants

Regarding environmental issues, there is interest in providing “*native plants at affordable prices, along with information about why natives are so essential in our ecology.*” There were also several comments about types of exhibits/demonstrations to educate the public about invasive plants.

While only 28% of volunteers who participate in plant sales checked “concurrent sessions” above, many respondents described the types of events that they provide:

Pop-up demonstrations on various topics
Skill demonstrations – tool sharpening and cleaning, soil testing, etc.
Lecture/demonstration on native and invasive plants

The comments reflect a generally positive attitude toward the plant sales. *“This is my favorite event. It is exciting to educate people as they make selections for their homes - especially regarding natives.”* While it is likely that the plant sale is a major fund raiser for the units who engage in it, there was little mention of that in the comments. The emphasis remained on its importance as an educational event.

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

Continuing Education

Most volunteers indicate that it is very easy to meet the required 8 hours of continuing education each year. One survey respondent said, *“I have spent by far more hours than required because I could choose subjects that were of interest to me.”* And another noted, *“Almost every meeting we dedicate an hour to education... presentations are always enlightening.”* And with COVID, EMG volunteers have learned to use webinars to much greater advantage: *“...attending virtual meetings has saved me hours and so much stress.”*

Focus groups made a point of indicating that they enjoy learning together and from each other. MG College is hailed as a great opportunity to meet the continuing education requirement through great speakers and at the same time engaging in one of the favorite activities: learning with friends – camaraderie. One EMG unit *“conducts a book club with discussions and further reading/research.”*

The comments from both the focus groups and the survey, however, indicate that there may be some concern about what counts for continuing education and what doesn't. *“...Guidelines, please.”* The state EMG office personnel take the perspective that it should be at the discretion of whomever is responsible locally to make those decisions. They acknowledge that they would most likely be a little more lenient about many opportunities than some of our coordinating agents may be, but they don't wish to micromanage that aspect of the EMG program.

The range seems to be quite wide, from coordinating agents who are totally hands on to those who trust their volunteers to make good judgements most of the time. Some coordinating agents ask their volunteers to fill out forms to have their continuing education hours approved. Some expect volunteers to give a call or send an email when they have a question about whether the continuing education opportunity is valid or not. A former coordinating agent said, *“I don't remember a time when I disapproved. If they had a question about whether it was valid or not they just called or emailed me and I don't remember a time when I disapproved, because if they were coming to me, it meant that they were interested in it, and, if they are interested in it, I want to encourage them to dig into it.”*

Coordinating agents may want to provide volunteers with some guidelines for making valid continuing education choices. While the state EMG office personnel do not want to micromanage the individual units' continuing education, their advice is to approve continuing education if it is relevant and in the interest of the EMG program. *"Can I watch this series on YouTube? Dig in, if it's reputable."* With the pandemic there has been an explosion of webinars, and EMG volunteers should be aware of the excellent webinars posted on the Virginia Tech EMG Webpage. Many volunteers expressed their appreciation of the abundance of webinars with comments like, *"Webinars make information more available to busy Master Gardeners."*

In the past there have been some coordinating agents who would allow events to count as continuing education only if they were VCE events. The state EMG office personnel find that to be much too limiting. There should be some level of programmatic integrity, but to think that VCE is the only source of content that is of value to our volunteers is misguided. As an example, the Virginia Native Plant Society recently sponsored a webinar featuring Kelly Norris who had also been a keynote speaker for the 2021 International Master Gardener Conference, and it was excellent. One volunteer said, *"I love all the seminars that are offered by Cooperative Extension in the mid-Atlantic states. I've attended seminars given by PSU, Cornell, and VT."* On the other hand, anything that is sponsored by VCE should automatically be acceptable.

Education is a much broader area than some of the controls placed on EMG continuing education might indicate, and once again, flexibility is a key for accessing the wealth of opportunities. A lecture by an expert with a PowerPoint is not the only way to provide education, and it may not always be the most effective method for meaningful learning. Consider the value of the research that's required to make educational charts for community display. What about the EMG volunteer's follow-up after having to say, *"I don't know, but I'll find out for you?"* Or the volunteer who conducted an experiment and wrote an article about it? The time spent on things like this can easily be counted as part of the project rather than for an individual volunteer's continuing education. But, no matter how the hours are counted, the benefit of acquiring new knowledge should not be undervalued.

Continuing education is an important way for volunteers to develop their knowledge and dive into topics that are only covered briefly during their training classes or in the handbook. Continuing education offers many benefits for EMGs. It offers the opportunity to cover information to a greater depth than was presented in the initial training. Speakers and presentations expose EMGs to other agencies and information resources; resources which they may consult when teaching the public about environmental horticulture. As well, continuing education is the perfect opportunity to build both personal and professional skills that ultimately enhance the local educational programs.

Continuing education activities must be approved by the local coordinator. The state office encourages local coordinators to be open to new opportunities for volunteers to engage in continuing education activities. Coordinators should encourage volunteers to engage with education opportunities and find things that they are interested in and passionate about. VCE

sponsored events should automatically be assumed to be approved for volunteers who look to engage with those programs.

The quality of training and the opportunities that are encouraged or made possible are tools for retaining EMGs. Volunteers come partly because they want to know more about gardening. Keeping the EMGs well-informed and educated will help keep their interest levels high. Once they've engaged with new topics, volunteers can use that knowledge during new opportunities.

Local coordinators can set continuing education topics that they see to be of importance (ex. climate change related topics) but can also send out an annual survey to help gauge topics that the volunteers are interested in learning more about. This can help with future planning and with connecting EMGs to those topics through local resources. Continuing education should be fun, informative, and help EMGs continue to strengthen their communities. For those volunteers who have spent many years as an EMG and have a good grasp on knowledge, finding ways to offer more advanced level sessions or series can prove to be beneficial.

Community Education

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

"If you are educating the public, you are educating yourself because none of us are horticulturists."

Most everything EMG volunteers do has a community education component. One focus group participant commented that, *"If criteria are not met, then it is tweaked to meet the educational component."* And that, *"Projects can be discontinued if the education component cannot be met."* The following discussion includes the top three most popular ways through which EMG units meet their mission of providing horticultural education for their communities.

Help Desk: The Help Desk was rated #1 (with 9 in 10 volunteers checking it) as the most important means through which their EMG unit provides community education/outreach. COVID changed the face of the helpdesks and as one respondent put it, we *"refer to them as Mobile Helpdesk Events."*

For many units the Help Desk is a central part of the internship. This gives interns the opportunity to work with an experienced EMG volunteer in answering the wide variety of questions that come in, and as a result interns gain exposure to a wide variety of horticultural information. This practice helps build good research skills and hopefully inspires curiosity early in the volunteers' association with the EMG program. Our *"help desk is a process for how to find a solution to a problem as well as a public service."* It is a means for *"training volunteers to arrive at a solution - how to ask the right questions to make a diagnosis and find a solution."*

Help Desks take many forms and are sometimes merged with plant clinics and farmers' market events. Some Help Desks maintain regular hours and are physically staffed at those times. Some are available by email or voicemail. Some pop up here and there. And some are all of the

above and more. *“Our Horticultural Help Desk has always had a ‘mobile unit’ present at our annual Plant Sale.”*

Plant Sale: Some EMG units think of the plant sale as primarily an educational event – both for volunteers and for the community – and a few units still think of the plant sale as primarily a fundraiser. If your unit is in the latter group, you are missing a golden opportunity. The survey results in Part II above show that, from the choices given to survey takers, the plant sale ranked #2 in importance to their unit’s work in education of the community.

If your EMG unit does not already have a plant sale as part of their Community Education repertoire, here are some things to consider in planning one:

Community service

- provides good plants into the community.
- focus on information about native plants and guard against selling invasive plants.
“Offer many native plants, do not sell any invasive plants, educate people about why natives are important, offer high quality native plants at affordable prices, very proud of our unit’s efforts.”
- Public relations. Enhance status of EMG in the community.

Educational opportunity for volunteers

- learning about and practicing propagation.
- researching and making meaningful plant tags and other signs.
“Our unit is very conscious of correct labeling with both common and scientific names of plants.”
- being prepared to discuss aspects of plants with the customers.
“Ask About That Plant’ station, manned by both new and experienced MGs and Interns.”
- looking up information during the plant sale itself to answer questions.

Community education

- General information provided on tags and other labels.
“Pictures of plant at full growth probably would be useful too.”
- One-on-one conversations about plants with attending volunteers.
One unit offers a *“Plant doctor table.”*
- Concurrent presentations, exhibits, help desk.
“We have 10-minute ‘pop up’ demonstrations on different topics.”
- Concurrent programs for children.
“Our theme is always pollinators, and we have numerous related displays and children’s activities.”

It is essential for EMG volunteers to focus on the educational value of their plant sales as primary and the fundraising as secondary, even though many units depend on those funds to do their other work. When EMG units choose to see their plant sales just as fundraisers, the failure of imagination and initiative result in a wasted opportunity. When units aspire to make the plant

sale a super educational event, the pieces fall into place one by one, and it can become a much-anticipated learning opportunity for the community as well as for the volunteers.

For many EMG volunteers the plant sale is their favorite event. *“It is exciting to educate people as they make selections for their homes – especially regarding natives.”* There is plenty of opportunity for camaraderie and learning together: *“...involvement with other MG's is very enjoyable and there is always something to learn.”*

Demonstration gardens: It is not in the mission of the EMG program for volunteers to provide free gardening labor to individuals or other civic groups, but volunteers do need to take care of their own demonstration gardens. Most EMG units work in their demonstration gardens as teams, and a lot of planning and learning takes place while the weeding, mulching, trimming and plucking are going on. Some units, in an attempt to place higher value on this work, use the word “maintaining” rather than “weeding” or other similar words to refer to work that keeps the demonstration/teaching gardens in good shape for demonstration/teaching. In addition to the garden itself, one volunteer bragged that in their unit *“Every demonstration garden has coordinator who is a teacher.”*

In talking about model gardens, Kelly Norris, in his keynote address at the 2021 International Master Gardener Conference, recommended that EMG volunteers abandon the word “maintain” and start using “manage.” EMG volunteers don’t just want to “maintain” them and keep them as they are.

EMG volunteers want to “manage” and continuously improve them. It is important for EMG volunteers to cultivate their demonstration/teaching gardens to be the very best possible teaching tools and to value the work required to make that possible. As gardening educators, we must value all the preparation that is required to present a good lesson. *“Demonstration gardens are not just about beauty. They teach more than that, not only for public, but also for the volunteers themselves.”*

In addition to the good selections of plants, informative labels, etc., most EMG units offer on-site demonstrations, open houses or other events. Some provide kiosks or other displays with valuable information for the public. *“Everything we do is fulfilling our educational mission.”*

Gardening Class for the community: (This was not part of the survey, but bears mention in consideration of EMG’s goals for community education.) Some folks who are not already EMG volunteers find the training class so enticing that they sign up and take the class with no intention of becoming volunteers. As a result, the attrition rate for training classes can be bothersome. EMG units like to assume that through the class they are investing in future volunteers and consider folks leaving at the end of the class as a negative. Maybe. Or maybe, the EMG unit has met the goal of educating the public, but just needs to find a more suitable way to do it.

As “gardening educators,” EMG volunteers could provide other, equally appealing opportunities for those folks. What if your unit would offer a simultaneous, somewhat abbreviated version of the training class taught by your senior volunteers? It could include most of the horticultural

classes and none of the other EMG training necessities – sort of “Gardening 101.” When prospective volunteers are interviewed for the training class, beginning gardeners and those with no interest in volunteering could be channeled into the alternative class.

Further Considerations

In light of the learning theories related to formal and informal adult education discussed earlier, these results suggest ways local units can promote shared learning and collective group problem solving to exercise the skills that appeal to the EMG volunteers and simultaneously benefit the local program. Also, consider whether local unit leadership recognizes and values both active and passive learning opportunities for EMG volunteers and community members who attend approved VCE public events. Are opportunities for the public to learn varied and accessible based on time offered, content provided, and expected outcomes?

#5 TEAM SPIRIT

Social Fabric and the Work of the Program

“You don’t keep people in the group unless they are having fun.”

PART I – Focus Groups

This section is based on the focus groups’ responses to these questions:

- How are you part of the social fabric of your unit?
- How would you rate your unit’s *esprit de corps*?
- How is it important in doing the work of your programs?

The EMG Coordinators Manual lists social engagement as one of the reasons for the existence of the associations that are part of most of the EMG units. (See the Definitions section at the end of this document for full statement about associations in the EMG Coordinators Manual.) The only unit in this study without an association seemed to be well engaged socially as well. All the participating focus groups described their EMG units as *“people having fun.”* *“Social activities are important for keeping a unit together.”*

Camaraderie and Collegiality. EMG units participating in the focus groups in this study seem to be very cohesive and populated with people who genuinely like each other. It’s a *“feeling of like-minded people who want you to be there.”* One volunteer boasted that their unit has *“no confrontational personalities.”* It is common for strong loyalty and camaraderie to develop in the small circles of the individual projects, and some participants would like to have more personal socialization across the total organization. One volunteer mentioned an internal communications committee tasked with this matter, and one mentioned that their Board had discussed collegiality as a serious subject.

Collaborative problem solving. As passionate lifelong learners, volunteers agreed that some of their best educational opportunities came from solving problems together. *“Problem solving together...then go for pizza when we get finished.”* Volunteers love learning from each other as they figure out the answers, and they find it reassuring that no one has to know everything. *“When we’re learning together, we can see who is good at some things.”* One volunteer described the EMG program as a place to *“meet people and learn of opportunities.”* These quotes demonstrate social constructivism in action as a learning theory framework for the EMG volunteer program.”

When a lot of good ideas are coming in, it is important to be flexible and consider input from various people and perspectives. Volunteers must be comfortable in knowing that their voices are being heard and that their contributions matter. Listening to concerns and respecting differences of opinion are crucial in collaborative learning and problem solving.

Valuing Volunteers. This includes more than just recognizing and celebrating achievements. Volunteers know that it is important to be welcoming to new recruits and proactively getting

them engaged in the work of the unit. The personal connection is important for helping new volunteers become engaged as well as for keeping long-time volunteers actively involved. *“I’ve always felt welcome on whatever project I’ve joined, and I’ve dabbled in quite a few.”* People stay around because they feel valued, and personal interaction is an important element of that.

Projects. One of the most important aspects of the demonstration garden management is the socialization with other gardeners. Volunteers are willing to serve and do the work, but the *“icing on the cake”* is the socialization, including their contacts with the public. Projects generate a lot of spirit, especially the large projects and special events.

Project leadership. This emerged as an important issue in the conversations about team spirit. Volunteers expressed the need to guard against a project falling under the leadership of someone who is too controlling and who takes ownership of the project in a way that it becomes a closed cohort and excludes other volunteers. One unit faced this issue directly by incorporating a very deliberate rotation of leadership based on a three-year model (much like vice president, president and past president), and they feel that this model builds camaraderie. With this plan the *“Group is what drives the project. Change in leadership can be seamless.”*

Training class. It is important to recruit with enthusiasm and to get trainees involved in the projects very early. Normally, trainees from any training class bond through their interactions and activities during the class. Some volunteers are concerned that while the online classes during COVID were generally of high quality, they did lack the normal socialization, making the buddy/mentoring programs even more vital in building team spirit

Coda. One of the personal highlights is when one of the volunteers opens his or her personal garden for other volunteers to tour. *“Come on over and we’ll dig something up.”*

PART II – Survey

This section is based on the survey responses to these questions:

- How important are social engagement and camaraderie in accomplishing the work of your MG unit?
- When do most of your new volunteers first get involved in your unit’s projects?

(See Appendix C for full details of the questions.)

Social Engagement and Camaraderie

EMG volunteers generally consider social engagement to be vital to good participation and retention. Being able to form teams to work well together is crucial to the success of the program. *“This is the backbone to a good association,”* and is essential to building community, trust, loyalty and respect among volunteers. *“The volunteers who become socially engaged with their fellows are the ones that stay around and continue to volunteer.”*

The survey asked for a rating from 0-5 on the importance of social engagement and camaraderie in accomplishing the work of the EMG unit. The answer appeared as a sliding

scale, allowing respondents to select points between the whole numbers. The mean score for the question was 4.15.

The comments reflect much concern about COVID interfering with personal interaction in most EMG units. There was an especially strong consensus that in-person activity is extremely important for the training class. Recognizing the ease with which the EMG program and individual units moved to online meetings, classes, etc. one volunteer commented that, *"It will be a sad day when VCE Master Gardeners no longer have in person classes."*

New Volunteers Getting Involved

Only 18% of survey respondents report getting involved in the unit's projects during the **training class**. 63% of survey respondents report getting involved in the unit's projects during the **internship**. (The remaining 19% reported being unsure.) There is no noticeable difference in level of satisfaction with the EMG program between the two groups, but participants who failed to get involved did not answer this survey.

Fewer respondents who became involved in the unit's projects during the training class reported having a mentor than those who became involved during their internships. The presence of an actively involved agent only slightly influenced new recruits to get involved during the training class.

Most of the comments pointed to the value of getting new recruits involved during the training class. When volunteers begin work on the projects during the training class, it *"helps to get to know others and see how things are organized. That is what I did."* Most volunteers *"can't wait to get involved in on-going projects and want to be part"* of the program.

Several respondents pointed out that the risk management training class and a few other requirements must be met before trainees are allowed to begin their volunteer work, but this is more representative of the survey comments: *"I think if we scheduled the classes about risk management and a preview of some of our projects earlier in the class schedule, members of the class would have the opportunity to begin their volunteer work with seasoned gardeners while they are still taking the classes if they choose."*

PART III – Observations and Implications

What we found, what it means and what we do with it

"If you have a bond of friendship and social engagement with your fellow gardeners, you are more likely to look forward to working with them on regular projects, even if it is doing hard labor.... You are more likely to be loyal to the group ... to carry your fair share of the load." Camaraderie "is key to retention, in my view, and to the success of any endeavor driven by volunteer commitment."

One of the most effective elements in getting the work of the EMG unit done is the spirit of camaraderie that develops among volunteers. Friendships among team members allow the work to get done, and working together helps to build those friendships. It's a lovely circle. *"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.” Some respondents talked about building camaraderie through social events, but most focused on their work as the axis for developing their team spirit.

Next, after getting the work done, learning together is an important basis of strong camaraderie. Volunteers like hanging out with like-minded gardening buddies. *“Isn’t it all about exchange of knowledge and asking each other questions...?”* While volunteers admit that the enthusiasm is best shared in person, and has been a bit stifled by COVID, their optimism remains strong. *“One of the best things about being an EMG is the kindred spirit because of the love of and sharing knowledge and of growing plants.”*

The focus groups zeroed in on the *“need to be respectful of difference of opinion.”* They reminded us that teamwork requires that volunteers *“feel comfortable and have their voices heard.”* Several units stressed the importance of considering new ideas offered by volunteers—*“More flexibility, more input from different people.”*

One EMG unit shared their three-year leadership plan that not only secures strong leadership for their projects but also *“builds camaraderie.”* In the first year the EMG volunteer is the *“learner,”* in the second the *“director,”* and in the third the *“mentor.”* This system helps to get new people to step up and some to move on, and to get new ideas into the mix.

For many EMG volunteers, camaraderie is the reason they stay. “I wouldn’t be giving away my time and effort if I didn’t enjoy the people that I’m doing it with. I get to volunteer with people whose expertise I admire and who are fun to work with.” And to sum it up, “If it’s not fun, why do it!”

EMG leadership cannot create camaraderie, but it can act to create an environment where camaraderie will flourish. Younger volunteers in the unit are particular target area for proactive cultivation; several of them commented that they often feel a condescending attitude from their older, more experienced peers. Quite the opposite ought to be true. Younger volunteers bring many skills that the older volunteers have never known, along with the wonderful energy of their youth. EMG leadership – coordinating agents, association leadership and savvy project leaders – must carefully observe the ways in which younger volunteers become engaged in the work of the unit, must encourage them to consider the range of volunteer opportunities available within the unit, and must make every effort to ensure that they feel valued within the unit.

Proactively Engaging New Recruits

Once again, in both the focus group discussions and the survey comments, the subject of getting new recruits involved in the work of the unit early was front and center. *“We are now starting to involve them during training class. This is working well. Strike while the iron is hot.”* EMG volunteers recognize the importance of early engagement as the springboard for healthy team building, but not all units are set up to accomplish this in the most effective and affable manner. The state EMG office has collected information from coordinating agents that confirms

that, when units waited rather than engaging trainees in some type of activity outside the classroom, they struggled to keep their volunteers.

Over 60% of survey respondents indicate that new recruits in their units get involved in their projects during their internship. At the same time most respondents' comments indicate that that is too late. There is a consensus that serious engagement must happen during, not after, the training class, *"right after completing risk management and civil rights trainings."*

Simply giving trainees a list of internship opportunities as they graduate from the class is not engaging them. All trainees should in some way be committed to the work of the unit and contributing productively to it before the class graduation. They can be *"required to complete some hours ... during the training class,"* and most of the time trainees are quite eager to do so.

This proactive engagement – and initial building of team spirit – can take many forms. For example, trainees can be invited into the ongoing projects, in a sort of apprenticeship, working in concert with one or more seasoned EMG volunteers. Trainees could also develop mini projects during the class that they might bring into their internship in some pre-planned way and then continue as certified volunteers. The whole range of possibilities between these two options is limited only by the imagination of the EMG volunteers managing the training program. *"Some enthusiastic trainees begin attending demo garden work parties before becoming interns."*

Throughout this study respondents have expressed their pleasure in teaching and learning together. Getting trainees involved with seasoned volunteers simply enhances the opportunities for this and for getting to know each other. Furthermore, mixing the theoretical with the practical is usually a good educational practice. *"The new members must feel involved and help with tasks that are new for them,"* and be able to *"work with seasoned gardeners while they are still taking the classes."*

One volunteer left a comment saying, "New volunteers are given the opportunity to get involved in unit projects during training but some are hesitant to do so as joining established groups can be intimidating. Some interns feel that their knowledge base is lacking and need to realize that being a master gardener is a long-term educational experience for all of us. Also, they need to hear that learning from each other is a major component of being a master gardener."

Timing of the training class may be a factor in the ease of engaging the new recruits. One survey respondent said, "Classes end in November/December here and the newest interns are kind of left hanging until Spring. And, there are very few if any programs here in the early spring." A lot of factors influence the scheduling of the class: the workload of the coordinating agent, the availability of speakers and EMG volunteers, etc. Or maybe it's just the way it's always been done. Whatever the schedule and the reasons for it, the unit leadership must make every effort to get the trainees meaningfully engaged in the work of the unit before the training class finishes. Interns should never have to feel that they are on their own at a new starting point.

#6 ORGANIZATION

Structure and leadership

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

PART I – Focus Group

This section is based on the focus groups' responses to the following questions:

- How would you characterize the relationship between your agent and the MG unit?
- Do you have an association?

Trust: In response to this focus-group question, the first characteristic mentioned by the participants was a high level of trust shared between the unit's coordinating agent and the volunteers. All the groups mentioned mutual respect and one volunteer labeled it as *"no friction."* In describing the kind of trust the agent has for the volunteers they listed actions like his/her delegating some authority directly to Master Gardener volunteers. One volunteer mentioned that their agent attended training sessions but counted on the volunteers to run the training class.

Agent's Leadership: There was consensus that the ideal agent is a leader who sees the big picture and is not just a manager. He/she is engaged and "sets the tone," without seeming to meddle. One volunteer praised the agent's ability to recognize volunteers' talents and figure out how to best incorporate those talents. This conveniently allowed the volunteers to be a productive part of the agent's team. A volunteer said that it is a *"smart person who realized that Master Gardeners can help him do his job to a certain degree."*

EMG volunteers need to be valued for their contributions, and it is essential to have an agent who appreciates them. An agent should have high expectations of the volunteers, and, at the same time, recognize that they are volunteers. One volunteer commented that *"When agents take an interest in the Master Gardener program, then they can work more effectively at their job as well."* The consensus was that the agent should be an advocate for the EMG volunteers.

Volunteers have lots of ideas and express appreciation for agents who are supportive of and receptive to their ideas. Some commented that agents like to take time to think things through and ultimately want solutions.

Agent's Personal Qualities: Units participating in the focus groups unanimously sang the praises of their agents. They genuinely like their agents and enjoy working together with them. One volunteer said that their *"agent is a pretty positive person – a good role model for me."*

Some of the words used to describe their agents include personable, knowledgeable, helpful, super creative, nice, funny, high energy, dedicated, approachable, available, extremely supportive, amazing work-ethic. One volunteer stated that the agent *"makes you feel good about yourself."* One mentioned that sometimes the agent is not as responsive as they would

like, but Master Gardener volunteers recognize that the agents are very busy and work very hard to be well organized.

Collaboration: Good collaboration between the agent and the volunteers must start with a good channel of information flowing both ways. Volunteers reported satisfaction in being able to negotiate with the agent on projects and in having an agent who was always there when needed. One volunteer, in describing their relationship, said that their volunteers are eager to jump on any request from their agent. We *“couldn’t ask for a better agent. He is always there and doesn’t interfere.”*

Volunteers: *“Volunteers have lot of ideas and desires for how they want to function.”* Generally, they recognized a lot of potential in each other. They commented about being part of pretty demanding groups with many volunteers and many projects. Understanding that their primary mission is to become EMG teachers, several focus group participants gravitated toward a conversation about their training classes. They felt strongly that the training classes need to be conducted within the unit but that it would be a good idea to share training information with other units.

Other Factors: Two units described having a **coordinator** (in addition to the agent) who works closely with their agent. They felt this was a big help in doing their work, especially because it allowed them to get answers right away. One volunteer commented that this may be a factor that helps them be more organized than some other units

Many EMG units encompass **several counties**. While each unit has one designated agent, Master Gardeners from multi-county units are pleased that they can tap into the expertise and good will of the other agents, as well.

PART II – Survey

This section is based on the survey responses to the following questions:

- Does your unit have an association and how would you characterize the leadership?
- How would you describe your agent’s general involvement with your MG unit?

(See appendix C for full details of the questions.)

EMG Unit Associations or No Associations

28% of respondents reported that they are not sure whether their unit has an association. Those responses have been excluded from the following comparisons of units with or without associations.

Of the remaining 72% who indicated yes or no on this question, 9 in 10 indicated that their unit does have an association. Volunteers who participate in units with an association report a somewhat higher level of activity, but the survey shows little difference between units with or without an association in their level of satisfaction with the EMG program.

Having an association did make a difference in the EMG volunteer's ability to meet his/her need to engage in service and give back to the community. 68% of volunteers from units with an association reported that the EMG program met their need to provide community service "very well" as opposed to 58% of those from units without an association.

The presence of an association makes a little difference in the way the unit provides community education/outreach. Both categories have a distinct top four activities including help desk, demonstration gardens and children's programming, as described in chapter 4 of this report. However, units with associations keep the plant sale in the top four while units without an association rank their speakers' bureaus in their top four.

One of the expectations of an association is to take responsibility for providing continuing education for its members. All EMG volunteers indicated that it is quite easy for them to meet their continuing education hours, with members in an association reporting a very tiny edge.

Another expectation of an association is to provide social exchange among members. When asked to rate the importance of social engagement and camaraderie in accomplishing the work of the unit on a sliding scale of 0-5 (5 being most important), there was a small difference. Since so many more volunteers are engaged in units with associations, the results are shown below in percentages of those volunteers.

Importance of social engagement and camaraderie in accomplishing the work of the unit:

Rank	5-4	3-2	1-0
With association	79%	19%	2%
No association	73%	22%	5%

(5 being most important)

For volunteers contributing between 20 and 250 hours per year, the balance between units with and without associations is about even. The rate of volunteers reporting 251-1,000 hours a year is somewhat higher from units with no association, but all the volunteers who report more than 1,000 hours annually are from units that do have an association.

Units with Associations: The following paragraphs are based on information provided by volunteers who are members of an association.

Association leadership can be very influential in the working of these units. 77% of respondents described their leadership as strong or good. Only 3% of respondents described their leadership as weak.

For volunteers of units that have associations, the quality of the leadership has a clear relationship to volunteers' satisfaction with the EMG program. Well over 90% of volunteers who reported strong leadership claim high levels of satisfaction with the program, while less than 50% of those who report weak leadership do so.

It is no surprise that there is a correlation between strong association leadership and the importance of social engagement and camaraderie in accomplishing the work of the unit.

However, volunteers reporting weak leadership still give fairly high rating to the importance of social engagement and camaraderie.

One curious detail is the fact that volunteers logging the fewest volunteer hours are the ones who report the highest scores on their association leadership.

Most volunteers who report their units to be “very active” also report strong or good leadership. Most volunteers who report that their unit is “not very active” also report adequate or weak leadership.

Units with or without a Coordinating Agent

85% of survey-takers responded that their EMG unit does have a coordinating agent and 9% responded that they do not. As a curiosity, 6% of the total respondents to the question indicated that they are not sure whether they have a coordinating agent.

The level of satisfaction with the EMG program is just slightly higher with units that have an overseeing agent, but the results show a significant dip among those volunteers who are not sure whether they have an overseeing agent.

Extremely or somewhat satisfied

Agent	90%	of 1102 respondents
No agent	87%	of 114 respondents
Not sure	76%	of 74 respondents

Units with Coordinating Agents

About two thirds of volunteers from units that have a coordinating agent report the agent as being “very involved” and about one third as “somewhat involved” in the EMG program.

Information earlier in this chapter shows that merely having an overseeing agent does not improve the EMG volunteer’s opportunities to meet their requirement for service hours. When considering the level of involvement of the agent, however, there is a difference.

Reporting easy or very easy to meet volunteer hours

Agent very involved	86%
Agent somewhat involved	83%
Agent not involved	76%

EMG volunteers logging 20-50 hours per year report a noticeable advantage in having a very active agent. As the number of hours per volunteer increases, the agent’s influence disappears.

Previous narrative shows that EMG volunteers find it very easy to achieve their continuing education requirement, and this section shows the level of involvement of the agent has only a slight impact on this.

Reporting easy or very easy to meet continuing education requirement

Agent very involved	94%
Agent somewhat involved	89%
Agent not involved	88%

When comparing EMG volunteers' ratings of the importance of environmental concerns with the level of involvement of the overseeing agent, it appears that the agent may have a bit of influence.

Reporting highest level of Environmental Concerns

Agent very involved	82%
Agent somewhat involved	78%
Agent not involved	64%

Three quarters of volunteers reporting their unit as "very active," also reported their agent as "very involved." Just over half of respondents reporting their unit as "moderately active," reported their agent as "very involved."

Volunteers from urban units report a higher level of involvement of the coordinating agent than rural and mixed rural/urban units do. Larger units report a higher incidence of agents being "very involved" than smaller ones do.

When EMG volunteers rated their Extension Agents on receptiveness to ideas generated by Master Gardeners on a sliding scale of 0-5 (5 being highest), the resultant mean was 4.18. Volunteers who rated their agents as "very involved" also rated them as more receptive to ideas generated by the EMG volunteers by quite a large margin. And, compared with the EMG volunteer's general satisfaction with the program, there is a strong relationship between satisfaction with the EMG program and the receptiveness of the agent to volunteers' ideas.

The question about how "helpful and willing to answer questions" the agent is yielded a mean of 4.41 on the same sliding scale of 0-5. As may be expected, the volunteers who rated their agents as "very involved" were also most likely to rate the agent as "helpful and willing to answer questions." There is a strong relationship between satisfaction with the EMG program and the willingness of the agent to answer questions.

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

The organization of the EMG units in Virginia may take a of range forms with many variations, but whatever the form, strong leadership is essential for efficient and effective work of the EMG units. EMG volunteers appreciate the leadership provided by their coordinating agent as well as the independence and responsibility to step up and do their part.

The importance of leadership – both coordinating agents and other leaders – in open communication and in making opportunities available to all volunteers is highlighted in a

complaint offered by one survey respondent: *“I don't think all opportunities are presented to the entire group. You are better able to participate in a program if you personally know the leaders of that program. If you don't know the leaders you have little chance of participating as slots are limited.”* Ownership in terms of taking responsibility is highly valued, but ownership in terms of building little fiefdoms can be very harmful to any organization, especially volunteer groups. This can be a challenge for leadership and sometimes the solutions are quite illusive. Term limits can be a possibility but present another problem, that of finding qualified, willing replacements. The three-year leadership plan described in Chapter 5 may work for some units but does require significant planning, and certainly requires attentive organizational leadership.

Associations: Most EMG units in Virginia have an association that is instrumental in accomplishing the work of the unit. An interesting fact that emerged in the survey, however, is that more than a quarter of volunteers were not sure whether they have an association. This could indicate a gap in understanding or a seamless connection between the association and the coordinating agent.

From the perspective of the office of the State EMG Coordinator and their team, the existence of local EMG associations and the state association, as an incorporated 501(c)3 organization, generally proves to be an added value and asset to the EMG volunteer program in Virginia. As long as roles and responsibilities and boundaries are clearly understood and managed well by Extension faculty and staff and EMG volunteer leaders, master gardener associations prove to be mutually beneficial to extension and the volunteers. Maintaining good relationships between extension faculty and volunteer leadership is a critical component to healthy connections. The functioning of the local association as it is intended further demonstrates the cooperative nature of the EMG volunteer program and highlights the necessity of internal programmatic collaboration. Agents, extension staff, and volunteers must never fall into an “us vs. them” mentality when distinguishing between roles of EMG volunteers and participation within a local master gardener association. We should all understand we are all working on the same team toward the same shared goals and expectations.

In some units the coordinating agent trusts the EMG volunteers to delegate some important decisions to the associations, *“like approving CE classes, based on guidelines that she gave them.”* When a healthy trust can be developed this practice can be extremely valuable to the coordinating agent in easing his/her workload. Our *“Agent trusts MGs to work at help desk, teach public.”* And with this high level of trust, an association that takes on more responsibility can also enjoy a higher level of achievement.

Relationship with coordinating agents: Some survey respondents expressed frustration about the lack of comments boxes attached to the questions about the agents. That was not an oversight. The survey was intended in no way to be an evaluation of agents. Those questions about agents were simply cross referenced with the more direct questions about what makes a happy EMG volunteer and a thriving EMG unit, much like the demographic questions were.

A surprise in the survey results was that the number of respondents (74) who reported being unsure whether they had a coordinating agent. This was a bit disturbing to the state EMG office.

As mentioned earlier, EMG volunteers logging 20-50 hours per year report a noticeable advantage in having a very active agent. As the number of hours gets higher, the agent's influence drops. Higher achievers are probably self-starters and rely less on guidance from the cooperative agent. This is an indication to the coordinating agents and other leadership that, if the EMG volunteers who contribute fewer hours rely on their guidance to a greater extent, they may want to step up their recognition and encouragement of this group. Volunteers with fewest volunteer hours also rate their association leadership the highest, so association leadership will also want to take note.

Volunteers from urban units report a higher level of involvement of the coordinating agent than rural and mixed rural/urban units do. Larger units also report higher level of involvement than smaller ones do. These are likely the same because most of the urban units are the larger units. It could be explained simply by the nature of the agent's responsibilities. While the urban agent may be able to focus more on horticulture, the rural agent's workload includes a wider range of responsibilities, including production level agriculture, leaving less time for horticulture.

The survey responses indicated a strong relationship between satisfaction with the EMG program and the willingness of the coordinating agent to answer questions. Our *"Agent is always available to answer questions, support the master gardeners."* EMG volunteers want to be involved with their agents and engage in conversations with them. Personal communication is highly valued.

Generally speaking, Virginia EMG volunteers enjoy a very positive relationship with their coordinating agents. They see it as a two-way street, and one noted that the *"Agent says he couldn't do the things he does if he didn't have the MGs. MG is part of his staff."* Cultivating a spirit of mutual respect is very valuable for both volunteers and the coordinating agents. *"A mutual benefit is wisdom from the agent and enthusiasm of the MG's."* EMG volunteers want to be helpful and fill the voids created by understaffing in the coordinating agent's office. *"Members would be willing to help in an unofficial capacity."*

It is important for the coordinating agent and association leadership to recognize the knowledge, skills and abilities of the EMG volunteers and to offer opportunities for volunteers to use them. *"The agent sees problems to be solved and knows the talent she has in front of her."*

Anecdotally, and from the state office perspective, the level of engagement of the local coordinating agent, regardless of their content expertise or the nature of their overall agent responsibilities, is critically important to the overall success of the local EMG volunteer program. When the local agent is involved with the local volunteer group it conveys that the EMG volunteer program is a priority, and it further conveys how they value the program in their overall local plan of work. The level of involvement or engagement by the agent can vary dramatically and the full scope of the local agent's responsibilities must be taken into consideration by local EMG volunteer leadership. The amount of time and focus an agent can afford is not uniform statewide but the local agent should determine the extent to which they can be involved so the volunteers and the EMG volunteer program thrive.

Better Impact: The current information management system, Better Impact (BI), had just been installed as we completed the last focus group session, so it was never part of their conversations. Since all survey questions were follow ups to the focus-group discussions, BI did not appear in the survey either. However, by the time the survey posted, many EMG volunteers had quite a bit of experience with it, and enough survey respondents left comments, that it should be mentioned in this report.

BI was selected when it became necessary to find an alternative to the previous system because of lack of support for it. The company providing BI is an international growing company that will likely provide service for the long term. The state EMG office has relied on local agents to get EMG volunteers up to speed with using BI. Individual units have selected from the various functions and learned to use those that suit their needs. Logging in volunteer hours was the most mentioned BI issue in the survey comments.

It is highly likely that volunteers are contributing more time than they are reporting. Coordinating agents and other leadership should address this with volunteers and encourage them to report their hours on a regular basis. On the same day would be best. A lot of reporting – recognition of achievement – at both the local and state level is dependent on EMG volunteers keeping their records up to date.

#7 COMMUNICATION

Sharing Information Internally and Externally

“A message that it’s been posted is not enough. If it was there to click on, I’d probably read it.”

PART I – Focus Group

The content of this section is based on the focus groups’ responses to these questions:

- How does your unit share information internally and externally?
- Do you believe it is effective? Why? Why not?

EMG Units’ Internal Communication

The larger units (over 200 volunteers) admitted that internal communications are a significant challenge and could always be more effective. One unit reported that internal communications had been their topic for self-evaluation for the year before COVID interrupted their process. Another reported that they are currently considering the status of their newsletter. But, by and large, participants indicated that their internal-communication systems are working very well.

“Our communication is awesome.”

Electronic media are central to internal communication. Units use a variety of means, including email, text blasts, password-protected websites and VMS (replaced by Better Impact) for calendar and other internal communication. Some units use Signup Genius because it saves time.

As EMG volunteers learned to use Zoom for monthly association meetings, they also started using it for smaller meetings and communications. Volunteers were creative and figured out how to maintain many of their responsibilities even when COVID kept them apart. While EMG volunteers were not able to meet in person, it was even more important for mentors to try to keep in touch with interns.

Volunteers appreciate getting frequent email from the agent. Units that have a paid EMG coordinator in addition to the agent praised their coordinators for enhancing the level of communication with the Extension office and especially for disseminating information.

Special considerations. Because many EMG volunteers are older, a few are still uncomfortable with all the technology. *“For older members... technology and they are not good friends.”* Each unit has a good plan for keeping those folks in the communication loop, mostly with phone calls. One volunteer added, *“We call each other a lot.”* Some units have found ways to provide tech support to volunteers who need a little help.

In addition to community outreach and internal communications, some units have developed regular communications with other EMG units to share best practices and information about opportunities.

External Communication

Participating units report fairly constant contact with the public and feel that their external communications are very effective. This includes not only news of opportunities but also timely subjects, such as seasonal and special interest topics. The formats include the range of electronic possibilities, from websites to Facebook to Instagram to emails, etc. Facebook was cited as particularly useful for advertising and a website for posting a newsletter. There seemed to be a lot of pride in the quality of the outreach communications and an appreciation for the feedback.

Some units have a specialized IT person to help with their public relations. And some still take advantage of local newspapers with regular content articles or *"banners to let communities know about projects."*

Newsletters are popular with readers, but a challenge for EMG units. Using electronic formats has made distribution much easier, but there is still unevenness. *"Everyone wants a newsletter, but no one wants to contribute to it in time to get it out."*

Demonstration/Teaching Gardens: Demonstration gardens are key points of communication with the community. *"People drive by or come by and see people working in the gardens and they ask questions about what they are doing."* EMG volunteers share much information through regular (sometimes monthly) informational communications including emails, Facebook, etc. Regular communication stimulates interest in the gardens. Many units provide information sheets at their teaching gardens and one mentioned that they maintain a "little free library" (donated by the mayor) with horticultural materials at one of their teaching gardens. One unit said that they *"publish info about what is going on in the gardens on a regular basis - once a month."*

Answering Questions. Master Gardener volunteers generally indicate that they enjoy answering questions through a variety of means such as help desks, plant clinics, etc. *"If there's a question it will get passed around until answered."* Facebook has become a useful tool for answering questions from the public as well as for the regular informational pieces like plant of the week, etc. Public events, such as farmers' market booths, give volunteers a welcome opportunity to have substantive conversations with members of the public. One person commented that *"We enjoy a reputation. People know who we are"*

An interesting challenge has emerged as a result of COVID's forcing EMG volunteers to deliver most of their public presentations via Zoom rather than in person. When people can attend these webinars from anywhere in the world, sometimes there are questions that are not relevant to Virginia horticulture.

PART II – Survey

This section is based on the survey responses to the following questions:

- What are your unit's most effective forms of internal communication?
- What are your unit's most effective form of communication with the community?

(See appendix C for full details of the questions.)

Internal Communication

In response to a list of choices generated by the focus groups, survey respondents rated the following as the top-five list of the most effective forms of communicating with each other (internal communication).

1. Emails
2. Regular meetings
3. Newsletter
4. Online Zoom meetings
5. Through projects/team leaders

Also receiving a significant number of votes are various forms of social media, internal websites, Signup Genius and phone calls.

Units with and without an association report the same top five best means of internal communication with only a slightly different order. The top five means of communication were identical when comparing units with or without a coordinating agent.

Better Impact (the current EMG information/volunteer management system) was coming on line just as the focus groups finished their work, so it was not part of their conversation, and therefore it was not one of the choices in the “top-5 list.” The survey occurred eight months later, so respondents were able to leave observations about Better Impact in the comments box.

Texting, listservs, and social occasions were mentioned frequently in the comments section. Other good ideas include a regular, twice-a-month update from the Volunteer Coordinator; team leaders keeping in touch with team members via phone and email; and many more.

Effective communication is essential for happy EMG volunteers, and the survey comments indicate that volunteers always wish to be well informed about the workings of their units. The EMG units did an exceptional job overall in responding to the communications challenge of the COVID years. *“Wow! I am so impressed by how our leadership has adapted during 2020! Prior to that we were not using Zoom or Sign-Up Genius nor an internal website. Excellent adaptability and I've learned a lot about technology use because of this. Bravo!”*

The comments shine a light on the quality of the organization and leadership of the units. One well organized unit enjoys, “...phone calls quarterly to less active members, mentors communicate with interns, our president sends an email every Sunday summarizing opportunities for the coming week and highlighting successes from the previous week.”

External Communication

In response to a list of choices generated by the focus groups, survey respondents rated the following as the top-five list of the most effective forms of communicating with their communities (external communication).

1. EMG Webpage
2. Facebook
3. Talking to neighbors (word of mouth)
4. Published materials
5. Newspaper

Newsletters, fliers and EMG-maintained email lists rated in the next tier. A rich collection of other forms of communication were mentioned in the comments section including Instagram, Zoom classes, virtual plant clinics, YouTube, radio, speakers' bureau and a few more.

EMG units with and without an association share the same top five forms of external communication with only slight variation in order. When comparing units with and without an overseeing agent, the top five were the same, but Facebook jumped in importance without an agent.

Physical presence at events and talking directly with people are prominent themes throughout the comments related to external communication. Some examples are farmers' markets, plant clinics, help desk, home visits program, exhibits at county fairs and other community event, and plant sales.

Collaboration with other agencies provides excellent public contact opportunities for some units. Examples include libraries (bulletin boards, lecture series or zoom series, display tables) and garden centers (literature racks).

A regular newspaper article is no longer a primary means of reaching the public, and most units have become quite adept at using the digital media options that are available to them. Two specific examples of interest mentioned in the comments are monthly articles about gardening on the EMG unit's website and weekly gardening tips on Facebook.

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

Communication may be the most vital piece of the “happy EMG volunteer / thriving EMG unit” puzzle. For any unit looking to energize its volunteers and set the stage for its projects to blossom, this may be a good place to start. While most focus groups in some way lauded their own communication practices, all of them admitted that there is always room for improvement. The survey responses reflected the same view.

Internal Communications

The issue of cliquishness, addressed briefly in the previous chapter, came up again in the many comments related to communication. While it can present an organizational challenge, it is perhaps as much a communication challenge. One of the goals of the EMG program is creating and sustaining an environment where everyone feels welcome. As EMG volunteers form friendships and build connections, the communications should be broad based and frequent.

“There are some projects that, seemingly, only a ‘select few’ get invited to participate in.”

Leadership – both coordinating agents and association leadership – should always be mindful of the possibility of volunteers being excluded from certain projects and must ensure that there is adequate communication – both broad based and personal – to prevent volunteers feeling left out.

The Better Impact system offers more opportunities than the old system, and at the time of the survey, many EMG volunteers were still trying to learn the ropes. *“Current pandemic has made all of these options more challenging. Our association is still getting used to the Better Impact model....”* Indications coming into the state EMG office since the survey are mostly positive, but adopting any new system takes time.

Survey respondents identified email as the most frequently used form of internal communication. Despite all the advances in technology, there are still a few EMG volunteers, especially in rural units, who do not have good access to the internet and cannot count on that as a reliable means of communication. Unit leadership must make sure that there is an alternative way of including those who may have limited internet connectivity.

Zoom, which became a critical means of communication during COVID, has filled a lot of gaps and left a few holes. “...regular meetings pre-COVID, which I preferred, but now we have kept to Zoom meetings, making it a little less easy to expound on some of our thoughts which we would do in smaller groups sometimes after the meetings.” Zoom was invaluable for continuing unit meetings and committee meetings, but “since COVID has drawn out so long, many people have zoom exhaustion.”

Quite a few survey respondents praised their mentors and mentoring as a means of good quality communications. “The Mentor Program is absolutely needed and well run by Master Gardeners. It is to assist the Interns, help them, encourage them, etc.” Not all EMG units consider their mentoring programs to be an important part of their internal communications, but perhaps that could be something to consider in continuously building better communications.

Oops! *“We don’t communicate except to receive an occasional email from a mystery someone whose role isn’t clear to me.”* (From survey comments.) If this is your unit, the research team hopes that you will speak to your leadership right away about fixing this.

External Communication

The survey respondents checked electronic means, like websites and Facebook, as their most effective means of communicating with the public. *“I think our unit offers an exceptionally good*

website and proactive social media outreach — all designed to support each other.” Their comments, however, indicated that face-to face is preferred and perhaps viewed as most effective.

Websites were rated as the number one way that EMG units communicate with the public, but respondents left very little information in the comments describing how they manage their websites or any description of their use. Are there emails with a live link that alert the community to look at new postings on the website? Do community members just know to check the website at certain times?

Facebook on the other hand goes to the user automatically. One EMG unit has a regular Thursday post about an invasive plant and several recommended native alternatives. This series is written by one or a small group of their volunteers. Another unit has a regular Monday post, “Sow You Know” that crosses a wide variety of topics and is written by many of the volunteers. Some units use Facebook for advertising events. Facebook does not require the technical and design skills of websites, so it is fairly easy for many EMG units to use it successfully.

Help desk, plant clinics and farmers’ markets are mentioned frequently. Each gets volunteers into one-on-one conversations with the public, and many volunteers seem to enjoy that. *“Here you can speak with them and hand out materials.”*

External communication “has been a challenge in the last couple of years as newspapers are not the main source of communication any longer. Often they don’t print our articles or announcements.” Some units, however, are able to continue with a weekly or monthly newspaper column. One EMG unit reports using the newspaper effectively for “announcements about training program (recruitment) – leave it in paper for long time – until class starts.”

Others have found it more effective to send regular newsletters directly to the public using email addresses that they have collected at various events. *“We have a free online newsletter called the Garden Shed with articles on plant care, vegetable growing, recipes, plant diseases etc.”*

Too many survey responses indicated that volunteers didn’t know about their unit’s communication with the public or that their unit should be doing more. But, as a point of optimism, one respondent said, *“We have a newly formed publicity committee, which I hope will focus on external connections.”*

Further Considerations

If external communications are identified as an opportunity for improvement, the local extension office and quite possibly the state office can work with EMG volunteers to find solutions to overcome this challenge. This also presents an opportunity to reflect on who is not currently at the table either as an active EMG volunteer or client groups in the community. Are there unidentified barriers impeding broader participation by the overall community? If so, can they be identified and overcome? Does the local unit demonstrate a culture of being sincerely welcoming? Is that atmosphere ongoing and sustained? Can you demonstrate that you have indeed created a welcoming environment internally for volunteers and externally to the

community? The State Office's Task Force on Accessibility and Connection could be a source of ideas or things to consider. The summary report from their work can be found [here](https://mastergardener.ext.vt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/TAC-Report-2021.pdf):
<https://mastergardener.ext.vt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/TAC-Report-2021.pdf>

#8 INVOLVEMENT

The Appeal of the EMG Program

*"Master Gardener organization is a joy in my life"
"I stay for the food."*

PART I – Focus Group

This section is based on the focus groups' responses to the following questions:

- What compelled you to get involved and keeps you involved with the MG program?
- Why do you think some folks leave the program?

Recruiting. Most units engage in similar recruiting activities that include providing special events and advertising materials, identifying potential good candidates and encouraging them to apply, and conducting screening of candidates. One mentioned having *"read about the program. It looked like fun and an opportunity to help others."* Many stories include a little arm-twisting by another gardener as the introduction to the program.

One unit stands out from the other seven focus groups in that they invite folks to take the class with no strings attached, and then during the class they encourage the participants to become EMG trainees and complete the requirements of the program. They believe in the *"soft sell,"* and allow an unspecified time for completion of the internship. They feel that this low-pressure process is consistent with the volunteer status of EMGs.

Learning. People are attracted to the training class because they want to learn more about gardening, and then the class opens even more doors to learning than they had expected. One volunteer described his classmates as *"learning about stuff they thought they already knew,"* and their pleasure in doing so. And, again, someone mentioned the importance of *"coupling fun with education."*

Volunteers mentioned things such as being drawn into the EMG volunteerism as they were taking the training class with another motive in mind, such as meeting a landscape association continuing education requirement. One person who had worked in a fossil-fuel related industry and wanted to turn toward the green industries said that he had found a comfortable home with the EMG program and began working on his unit's projects that are helpful to the environment.

There was significant recognition of educational opportunities offered beyond their own units, such as MG College and VMGA sponsored events. During COVID, EMG volunteers developed a new appreciation for webinars as they became almost a lifeline.

Love of plants. We cannot ignore the general love of plants shared by all EMG volunteers and their enthusiasm to share that passion with others. One participant said that the EMG program was just *"on my list of things to do."* One mentioned joining *"to learn about gardening. Didn't really appreciate what it was all about at first."* Volunteers love hanging out with *"like-minded*

plant people,” and one mentioned a desire to contribute to the next generation through horticulture and environmental involvement and contributions.

The people factor. For many volunteers the main reason to join the EMG program is to meet new people who share their interests. Volunteers enjoy hearing what others are thinking about gardening and sharing knowledge and skills with each other. *“You can do things as a group that you can’t do by yourself.”* The active social component of most units is often the glue that holds things together. Several units expressed appreciation for having some younger, working folks among their volunteers.

Retention. Retention improves when people become engaged very quickly in *“activities that mean something.”* A training class that establishes the habit of learning by doing, leads to better retention and leadership responsibilities. As one volunteer said, *“better training = better retention.”* It is important to keep examining what the programs are doing. One issue of ongoing concern is continually improving applicant screening. The quality of the mentoring program is very much tied to volunteer retention, and the quality of instruction (continuing education) keeps some people involved.

Leaving the Program. While questions about why folks leave the EMG program will not be part of the survey of current volunteers, there was significant discussion of the topic during the focus groups. The following is a collection of the reasons that current volunteers believe that others have left the EMG program:

Time constraints including work schedules and family obligations.
Moving away from the community.
Unable to meet requirements - lack of opportunities or not what they expected.
Some people “fall through the cracks.”
“Professional hobbyist moving on to something else.”
Can’t find their niche or *“have lost the spark.”*
Work is too hard.
Never intended to stay - may have taken the class for their professional benefit.
“Very few who just don’t like being a Master Gardener.”

PART II – Survey

This section is based on the survey responses to the following questions:

- What is the primary influence that drew you to the Master Gardener Program?
- Which best describes your personal engagement with the Master Gardeners in Virginia?

(See Appendix C for full details of the questions.)

The survey asked volunteers what drew them to the EMG program. Of the four choices presented in the survey the rank order is as follows:

1. Knew about the training class and was eager to learn more about gardening and landscaping (868 respondents)
2. Was looking for new opportunities and personal connections (565 respondents)
3. Motivated by another gardener, friend, or persuasive person (496 respondents)
4. (A distant 4th) Read Extension publications and/or attend EMG recruiting events (85 respondents)

In addition to the four options provided to survey takers, one other factor showed up quite strongly in the comments. Some new recruits clearly understood the mission of the EMG program and were truly looking for opportunities to teach and give back to their communities. Many of our volunteers come from teaching backgrounds and, as one noted, *“possess relevant expertise and experience to share.”* Folks commented about their love of talking about plants and about having opportunities to share knowledge. One wrote, *“I have a certificate in Landscape Design and wanted an outlet to teach others about gardening with the earth.”*

When the list above was compared with the level of satisfaction with the EMG program at this time, the order varied just a bit from the original attraction list. While “Reading Extension publications and/or attending EMG recruiting events” was the least powerful in drawing volunteers into the program, those who were drawn by it have become the most satisfied.

There is very little difference when comparing the motivating factors with the level of participation in the EMG program. The one exception is that volunteers who were motivated by “Reading Extension publications and/or attend EMG recruiting events” report greater participation in statewide activities.

There are a few interesting details to notice when we compare this question with several demographic questions. Men and women responded similarly to this question. Slightly more men indicating that they were motivated by another gardener, friend or persuasive person, and slightly more women indicating that they were motivated by the training class and eagerness to learn more about gardening and landscaping.

When compared with the indication of race, the response for #1 and #3 on the above list were pretty much the same. Considerably more white respondents checked that they were looking for new opportunities and personal connections. Twice as many Black and African American and other minorities indicated that they were motivated by reading extension publications and/or attending EMG recruiting events.

Only a little over 1% of EMG volunteers who responded identify as Hispanic. With that small group it is noticeable that more Hispanics were attracted to the EMG program because they knew about the training class and were eager to learn more about gardening and landscaping.

Several respondents commented that they were already engaged in philanthropic horticultural projects and wanted to find more knowledge and contacts. Here are a few examples

- *“...wanted to do something in the neighborhood to help protect the environment and to learn about water run off.”*

- *“I wanted to transform some community property from invasive plants to native and didn't know anyone or how to do it. I took the course to learn and network.”*
- *“I started a community garden this past year and wanted more training/resources”*

Another theme was relocating from another region of the country and wanting to get up to speed on the flora in Virginia. Quite a few respondents mentioned transferring from EMG programs in other states.

Perhaps “retirement planning” should be on our list of motivators for engaging in the EMG program. Some mentioned *“looking for meaningful volunteer opportunities during retirement,”* or simply *“volunteer enjoyment after retiring.”* Some mentioned that EMG had been on their bucket list and the first thing they did after retirement. (74% of survey respondents indicate that they are retired.)

And this reviewer’s favorite comment: “Saw a sign in a garden that said, Maintained by Master Gardeners.”

Personal Engagement

A little over half of Virginia EMG volunteers prefer to take advantage of opportunities mostly within their own units. About a third participate in statewide opportunities such as Virginia Tech webinars, MG College, VMGA, etc. The remaining 16% indicate that they would like to participate in more of the statewide opportunities.

The level of participation in statewide activities is not significantly affected by whether the unit has an association. As an interesting detail, however, those who reported that they are not sure whether their unit has an association are also considerably less likely to be involved in any activities beyond their local unit.

The category of part-time-employed volunteers has the highest percentage participating in statewide activities with retired volunteers in a close second place. Volunteers who work full time are the ones who indicated that they would most like to participate more in statewide activities. Retired volunteers (viewed as a category) are the ones who most prefer to stick with local activities.

In comparing the number of volunteer hours contributed annually with the level of state involvement, there are no surprises. The highest contributors are the most likely to be involved in EMG activities beyond their own units, and the volunteers contributing the fewest hours per year are most likely to prefer to stick with local activities.

Volunteers who identified their units as very or moderately active generally follow the pattern described in the first paragraph of this “Personal Engagement” section. On the other hand, volunteers who identified their units as not very active expressed stronger preference for statewide activities and less for sticking with their local activities.

The huge increase of online opportunities during COVID has made it possible for some volunteers to expand their involvement in EMG activities. There were many comments about the high quality of the webinars sponsored both by Virginia Tech and other EMG units. Both MG College and the International Master Gardener Conference were mentioned, and to quote one volunteer, “... *attending the MG College this year for the first time ... held virtually and be easier for me to attend. Very much looking forward to that.*”

Several volunteers made comments about the possibility of both VMGA meetings and EMG College becoming hybrid events in the future. Virginia is a big state, and some folks would like to be involved but prefer not to drive great distances.

And to round out this discussion, the level of participation to a great extent is dependent on good communication and leadership. “*I would like to participate more in any capacity if I knew where to sign up.*”

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

Recruiting and Retention

Everyone who applies to participate in the EMG volunteer program wants to learn more about gardening. That along with personal connections are the main reasons they do. “*Wanted to learn more about gardening and also have friends who had similar interests. Doing fun projects.*” Some folks sign up without even realizing that EMG is a volunteer organization. “*I really did not have a good explanation of what the program was all about.*”

The survey results show that most volunteers are attracted to the EMG program through personal connections and the appeal of the training class. Only about 7% of survey respondents indicated that the print materials and recruiting events were the reason, however, that group ranked higher in their involvement in the program. This may indicate that the volunteers who had a better understanding of the program from the beginning are the ones who became the most invested in the program, remained active the longest, and are becoming the most involved beyond the local level. This suggests that the most serious gardening educators may be attracted by the materials and recruiting events. “*Met MGs at a public event where they had a table set up. They seemed knowledgeable and friendly.*”

In order to attract more serious gardening educators, EMG units may want to revisit the quality of their print materials and recruiting events to be sure that their messages get out there and represent the mission of the EMG program clearly and convincingly. “*I found out about the class when reading an agent's weekly column in the newspaper. Was looking to get involved in the community and learn more about gardening in my new location.*” It is also important to note that a higher percentage of minorities were attracted to the program by the print materials and recruiting events.

Two of the most important actions cited as important in early retention of volunteers are

- Involving trainees in the work of the unit in a meaningful way during the class
- A strong, engaging mentoring program

For seasoned volunteers who are well engaged in the work of the unit, one of the most attractive benefits may be quality continuing education – real advanced training opportunities.

“NEED MORE SCIENCE. Not anecdotal opinions and old outdated science. I need new science.”

People leaving the EMG Program

There are a lot of good reasons that volunteers leave the EMG program. Sometimes life gets in the way, like family issues, moving to another state, etc. Some volunteers may find that they are just not a good fit with the EMG program, and as with the wrong job, it's time to move on. These are all common reasons for volunteers to leave the program.

Attrition for some other reasons, however, can be addressed by the individual EMG units. Sometimes this requires a little reorganization or change in perspective. And the most valuable is probably a good stretch in the imagination. “Because we’ve always done it that way,” is rarely the right answer. For example, if someone is planning to leave the unit for lack of opportunities, ask them what they might like to do, how that fits with the unit’s work and how they can help develop that project. Or, for people who join just to get the class, draw them into volunteering through interesting opportunities. Once again, the leadership and other savvy volunteers need to listen to what people say and then make a point of inviting them to participate in the EMG program in ways that suit their interests. *“I was lucky enough to be “recruited” to get involved with EMG. My past and EMG are a good fit and I am happy I was encouraged to get involved.”*

Careful screening of applicants can prevent some early attrition. Any unit that is simply looking for warm bodies to fill the class is probably sabotaging its own program. Selected trainees should be genuinely promising EMG volunteers. *“As a 40-year member of a garden club, I was intrigued by the serious educational aspects of Master Gardeners”*

One often hears older EMG volunteers talk about “aging out” of the program. For volunteers who have been active and productive in the unit for many years, please consider awarding them emeritus status. This allows them to remain in good standing despite their physical limitations.

Involvement beyond the local unit

Slightly over half of the survey respondents indicate that they prefer to participate only in local activities. Volunteers give various reasons for limiting their participation including family obligations, age and physical ability, distance, etc. *“I am attending the MG College this year for the first time as it will be held virtually and be easier for me to attend. Very much looking forward to that.”* For some EMG volunteers the sheer joy and satisfaction at the local level are enough. *“I am new, so I prefer to stay local for now.”*

Information about opportunities beyond the local level may be more easily available in some EMG units than others. *“I guess I don’t know about all of the opportunities other than the master gardener college.” “I would like to participate more in any capacity if I knew where to sign up.”* Coordinating agents and other leaders need to be sure that volunteers know about opportunities beyond their local units. *“Volunteering at the state level provides a different kind of fulfillment as an EMG.”*

One survey respondent suggested a central website where all state EMG units could list webinars and other educational opportunities. VMGA has attempted to maintain such a resource, and it would be useful to EMG volunteers. The best and most reliable resource for information about what is going on at the state level and in other EMG units is the state EMG office’s Bi-Weekly Newsletter that comes directly to the email address of every EMG volunteer. Watch for it!

The proliferation of Zoom webinars during COVID has made it much easier for some volunteers to expand their horizons. Not only are webinars conveniently delivered to one’s living room, they also save time and money. *“Now that many educational opportunities are available through Zoom: more members can afford to take advantage of VCE seminars.”*

#9 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

“Everybody in my life knows that I’m a Master Gardener, and they ask.”

PART I – Focus Group

This part of each focus group’s conversation was a free-for-all discussion of any important issues missing from the eight questions or a continuation of any of them. A few points in these conversations emerged as noteworthy.

Connections. In one unit, volunteers who had moved in from other states wondered why there are so few men among the EMG volunteers in Virginia. The issue of racial diversity came up several times, and one volunteer noted that minorities in their community have spectacular gardens and could be excellent educational resources. One unit mentioned offering scholarships to bring in more diversity. *“People respond better to people who look like them. Diversity is important.”* Also, having all the activities during the day is most certainly a barrier for some potential volunteers.

Greater diversity should be a goal for the EMG program. Most current volunteers are well educated, middle class, retired and white.

Agent. Again, the volunteers sang the praises for their agents. One noted that the *“Agent says ‘who will do this?’ and folks volunteer.”* They noted that one of the advantages of an engaged agent is the feeling of *“comfort in going to their agents to initiate ideas.”*

Interns/Internship. A few more details about internships emerged. One unit sets up their interns as teams, and one unit has an internship that lasts for three years. Most have mentoring programs, and they highlighted the need for mentors to be flexible. One group mentioned allowing more than a year to complete the 50 hours of service, if necessary.

Organization. Several discussed their collaboration with nearby EMG units and suggested that smaller groups might partner to bring in quality speakers. They reported that EMG leadership is interested in the wellbeing of volunteers and makes every effort to remove impediments. It is important that everybody gets to talk and present ideas that they would like to pursue. Participants generally reported pro-active attitudes.

Goal setting came up again in this part of the focus group discussions. Some groups bring in outside facilitators to help with their strategic planning process. One group pointed out that great things are *“not going to happen by accident.”*

Personnel. EMG volunteers expressed appreciation for the very personally interactive groups of volunteers who enjoy each other as persons. They take pride in the significant professional experience they bring to their units. They noted that it is *“Important to know we can depend on each other.”*

Unique Contributions. One unit described promoting native plants by planting them where people walk and putting up signs that read *“Natives live here.”* One commented that their unit

always thinks big and they would like to see more small focus sometimes, e.g. *“maybe it would be good to make a difference one-on-one, with neighbors.”*

PART II – Survey

The following section is an attempt to highlight a few of the many ideas that volunteers offered in response to this opportunity at the end of the survey:

The purpose of this research project is to shine light on the best qualities and practices of Extension Master Gardener units in Virginia. Please note other strengths and successes in your unit that you would like the researchers to consider.

The explosion of wonderful ideas and perspectives in this section of the survey is very exciting and a great tribute to the volunteers who took time to share their thoughts. It is impossible to include all the great comments in this report, so we have selected a few hoping they will be representative of the whole. The following topics are in no particular order.

Demonstration Gardens/Teaching Gardens are among the most frequently mentioned successes, and in most cases one of the most engaging aspects of the EMG program. It is likely that every unit has at least one demonstration garden, and some specific mentions include therapy gardens, pollinator gardens, gardens at hospitals and elementary schools, theme gardens, and many more.

New Recruits, Training Class, New Volunteers: EMG has a lot of winners – units claiming that their training program is the best in the state. There are comments like, *“...always a waiting list for new members.... Great Program!!!!”*

COVID caused a lot of scrambling to facilitate successful training classes and many of the resultant solutions may be predictive of opportunities and advantages for the future. Following is just one of such quotes found among these comments: *“... ironically, while many trainees this year mentioned drawbacks with the Zoom format, we had a significantly larger and younger training class than usual and their enthusiasm and energy have been excellent. Our thinking now is to alternate in-person/daytime training with evening/on-line programs to try to diversify membership.”*

Some units make a proactive effort to involve the new volunteers in their various projects at a very early point. Successful mentoring programs are important, and one unit mentioned their tracking system which allows them to respond if a *“student appears to be struggling or falling behind.”* *“New MGs need to become involved immediately!”*

Leadership: *“We have the best MG Board.”* Volunteers are very forthcoming in their appreciation for good unit leadership. They identify such qualities as open-mindedness, commitment to the unit’s mission, agility/flexibility, creativity, understanding of the issues and projects, empathy, openness to new ideas, and *“their ear to the ground ... frequently developing programs that will benefit the needs of our local community.”*

Some units incorporate leadership training, not only for board members but also for committee chairs and coordinators. To mention a few of the notable quotes:

- *“Our goals are well stated, and met.”*
- *“We find hidden talents that we turn around and use those talents to enhance our local program.”*
- *“Our unit has several people that I consider to be the ‘experts, leaders, and teachers’ who are generous with their knowledge.”*
- *“Well organized volunteer leadership team with mix of retirees and those still active in the workplace.”*
- *“We find hidden talents that we turn around and use those talents to enhance our local program.”*
- *“Directing the right people to the right projects”*

Strategic planning is not only a good way to ensure a unified path forward for the unit; it can also engage many of the volunteers in planning that future. *“Strategic planning has allowed member input to update our mission, goals and objectives and develop new projects to meet these goals focused on food security, equity, etc.”*

Agent: Because there was no comments box in the survey question about coordinating agents, many volunteers took the opportunity to sing praises for their coordinating agents in this section. It is clear that the positive influence of agents can have a great effect on happy EMG volunteers and on thriving EMG units. One volunteer described their agent as an *“extraordinarily qualified and effective extension agent who brings a depth of knowledge.”* Another volunteer pointed out the importance of having a coordinating agent who respects the volunteers and recognizes that *“we had lives and careers and previous experience which taught us all kinds of skills.”* It is a wise agent who values volunteers’ knowledge, skills and abilities in a win for everyone.

Technology: COVID has had a major effect on the operations and accomplishments of the EMG program, and the one silver lining may be that it has made all of us learn new things about technology and become more flexible in our communications. *“We subscribed to Zoom and have used it for all of our association and committee meetings so our work could continue. We are a better unit now than we were before the pandemic.”* Volunteers describe improving their websites, developing webinars, using Facebook as a handy educational tool, and more.

It is important to recruit volunteers (especially young volunteers who are internet natives) who are both knowledgeable and in possession of internet savvy and confidence. It is a pleasure to read comments from volunteers who are most proud of their unit’s advancement in various areas of technology. *“...our website is the best.”*

The changes necessitated by COVID got mixed reviews – most volunteers really liked the new options, but some can’t wait to get back to the more social habits of EMG. *“Master gardener college online allowed me to attend for the first time in 2020.”*

One of the main challenges, the training class, was met with a range of remote arrangements by the various units. *“Developing such an effective online training program during COVID was definitely a strength for our unit.”*

Advanced training: EMG volunteers want their “advanced training” to be really that and not just the rehash of things they already know. *“Nothing is more relevant and exciting than fresh research.” “The thing I value most about my EMG experience is learning about best horticulture practices from classes, recommended books and lectures, and being with other like-minded EMGs.”* Several volunteers mentioned a Master Gardener Book Club as a subgroup of their unit with an ambitious goal of one new gardening book each month, including authors like Doug Tallamy. *“Members are devoted to expanding and sharing knowledge.” “The wealth of knowledge in our unit is amazing.”*

Personal Passion - Learning something new about myself: When volunteers share their passion for gardening-related features, it becomes *“infections and brings people together.” “...with common goals, cooperating together and listening to other's ideas.”* Volunteers find the EMG program rewarding, *“...emotionally and physically through the social aspects of working as a team and serving in an impactful way, while minimizing the administrative burdens of the program is essential.”*

For successful engagement and retention, it is important for the work to be personally rewarding. “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.”

Diversity: The word diversity appears frequently in this section, particularly with regard to background knowledge, expertise, age, nature of the programs and projects, etc. *“We have diverse projects that affect a variety of people and communities.”* Another volunteer reports that their unit reaches out *“to the disadvantaged of our community by having a vegetable garden at a USO to help veterans with disabilities.”* Others comment on means of achieving accessibility, especially with regard to driving distance and time of day.

It would be a mistake, however, not to point out that racial and ethnic diversity are not a strong point of the EMG program. This is a factor that should be brought into sharper focus in recruiting new volunteers and in valuing the few minority volunteers who are already part of the program

Actual gardening: While none of the survey questions asked specifically about gardening skills, it is certain that the great majority of EMG volunteers are very much motivated by their passion for actually gardening. *“The opportunity to put in practice what we've learned. I love getting my hands in dirt.”* And volunteers love to *“grow their own plants for the plant sales.”*

Outreach: “Visibility of our unit at a variety of community events” seems to be a cornerstone of good public relations and successful educational outreach programs. “We go to where the people are: public library, Help Desk, local ag. fairs, plant sale in the local shopping center, beautification/demo garden/education session program.” Genuine care for the public needs and good public-relations skills are essential.

Communication with the public is at the foundation of the EMG mission, whether it's through the speakers' bureau, exhibits, digital media or one of many other ways. *“The focus on getting the vital research out to the general public is always exciting. People really do want to know what Virginia Tech and Virginia State are doing and saying. It carries credence.”*

Collaborations: Volunteers provide support and leadership in programs that reach a broad range of citizens through collaboration with other agencies. There was frequent mention of partnerships with public schools, libraries, churches, 4-H, FFA, scout groups, local native plant societies, beekeepers, and other non-profit, civic and state agencies that provide public education.

Just to highlight a few of the specific examples that were mentioned:

- Tasting program ... in our elementary and middle schools, to introduce fruits and vegetables, to children early in their lives
- Parks and Rec, Public Works
- Keep Norfolk Beautiful
- Audubon at Home
- Williamsburg Botanical Garden
- Plant NoVa Natives
- Maymont
- Wetland Partnership

Kudos: Volunteers noted the expansion of support for the EMG units from the state EMG office in recent years. Several mentioned much appreciation and gratitude for the biweekly newsletter, quality of Master Gardener College, etc. *“I think in recent years, the EMG program has improved immensely, giving more support to agents and units.”*

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

Leadership

Leadership is often defined as the “art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal,” but it is more than that. It is also having a vision – being able to see possibilities, to see what can be done and how to do it. Volunteers in some units elect their officers and appoint project leaders with an assumption that they possess the knowledge, skills and abilities to be successful. In most cases that works out fine because most volunteers bring an array of leadership skills from the other aspects of their lives. Some units cultivate a deliberate leadership succession, and *“The leadership training is done very well. It's clear that transitions are made as easy as possible, so that there are few gaps in group knowledge.”*

The state EMG office offers annual leadership development training for those in leadership positions or who may be interested in leadership positions within their unit. These have been held both in person as well as virtually and are well attended in both settings.

Strategic planning

Those units that have engaged in serious strategic planning generally report very positive outcomes.

- *“We are implementing a new strategic plan that includes new projects that promote and support environmental awareness, conservation landscaping practices, and outreach to underserved communities.”*
- *“Strategic planning has allowed member input to update our mission, goals and objectives and develop new projects to meet these goals focused on food security, equity, etc.”*
- *“Very pleased that [our unit] is now acting on the goals and objectives developed last year in our strategic planning.”*

Not all units engage in strategic planning, but it might be a good idea for all units to consider doing so. That means setting goals, determining actions to meet those goals and allocating the resources to support those actions. It is about looking at the future of the EMG unit rather than making decisions month-to-month or on an as-needed basis.

Volunteering

Volunteers generally offer their time and talents in exchange for some sort of personal satisfaction. *“My main objective is to teach but I also want to get something personally out of volunteering as well.”* All programs have parameters within which they must function, but it would be sad to hear a volunteer say, *“...our coordinator role is focused on compliance not empowerment.”* For the volunteer program to be truly successful it’s participants should be encouraged and have the opportunity to flourish in ways that may not be possible in other areas of their life. *“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.”*

Further Considerations

Engagement is one aspect of agent involvement, but approachability is equally important. Is the agent approachable or perceived by the volunteers as approachable? What can an agent do to actively demonstrate that they are indeed approachable? On the topic of planning and goal setting, the state office can be a resource to local units in determining an effective, meaningful process. In some instances, the state office may be able to be involved in the process, especially if there is unresolved conflict or other programmatic issues that should be addressed based on state-level program guidelines. If there appears to be a lack of alignment between the local office and the EMG volunteers, is there an opportunity for a both-and solution versus an either-or solution?

Philosophy on Volunteering *(from a former coordinator’s personal perspective)*

Overall, I find the majority of EMG volunteers in Virginia to be altruistic and philanthropic, if not with their financial support, then absolutely with their time and talents! Motivations of volunteers have been well studied and well understood across all volunteer sectors globally. One core motivating factor I have observed, as illustrated from this study, is that community members want to serve their community in a way that leads to improved community conditions for everyone. Often, EMG volunteers seek out our program as a means to meet a need they see within their local community. And the work they contribute toward meeting that need seems to

be personally fulfilling for most. Their desire to be a life-long learner culminates in their aspiration to inspire others by sharing the knowledge they have gained and for which they are passionate. And ultimately, they do all of this because it is FUN for them!

In my opinion, those of us who coordinate volunteers or are leaders within an organization of volunteers are successful when we adopt some of these perspectives:

- Be fluid, not flexible. We have to roll with change, which is not always easy -- even flexible things will eventually break. We deal with human capital and interpersonal interactions as much, if not more so than technical content. It can be messy, and things frequently do not go as planned or anticipated. Being fluid allows us to adapt more readily without totally disrupting forward progress.
- Policies vs. guidelines. We need to work extra hard to make sure our volunteer opportunities are not unnecessarily burdensome. We absolutely must work hard to ensure the policies and guidelines we do have are not intentionally or unintentionally creating barriers to participation by anyone who has an interest in what we do. Policies only when absolutely necessary and guidelines if it is something where we can make allowances locally is a good way to go!
- Well-managed volunteers and volunteer programs are an asset. However, poorly managed or mismanaged volunteers become a serious liability in many ways. We should strive to see our volunteers as an asset and work hard never to allow them to become a liability. This requires effort and energy and deliberate action and being proactive.
- Volunteering and volunteer management are not overly complicated. We take the approach that the skills we want to see emulated by our volunteers and by our faculty and staff who work with volunteers can all be taught. Everyone who participates in our program has the capacity to learn and teach others.
- One of our goals, explicit or unspoken, should be that of empowerment. It is not about us dictating and being absolutely prescriptive about everything we do (with some exceptions as it relates to public health and safety or legal matters). We should proactively look to our volunteers and their existing knowledge, skills, and abilities and leverage those appropriately.

#10. ENVIRONMENT

Concern for the environment was not a focal point of the original happy EMG volunteer and a thriving EMG unit inquiry. However, since it emerged as an important part of all the discussions, the research team decided to append a separate chapter for it.

“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.”

PART I – Focus Group

The focus groups mentioned the environment often enough to prompt one specific question in the survey.

Master Gardener volunteers are keenly aware of their relevance with regard to environmental issues. Even though many of the current projects are not specifically targeted toward environmental issues, many units are working proactively to move in that direction. One volunteer made a strong case for care of the environment being his hook for wanting to get involved in the EMG program. *“Going back to the land”* seemed a real calling for some of the respondents.

One volunteer mentioned being attracted to the EMG program because he had spent his career in a fossil-fuel-related industry and wanted to turn toward the green industries. He said that he had found *“a comfortable home with the EMG program and began working on his unit’s projects that are helpful to the environment.”*

PART II – Survey

This section is based on the EMG survey responses to this question:

- How important are environmental concerns to the work of your unit’s projects/programs?

When asked to rate the importance of environmental concerns in individual EMG units on a scale of 0-5, the response was quite positive. The mean score was 4.20.

There appears to be a connection between an EMG unit’s level of community service and their attention to environmental concerns. 85% of respondents who said that the EMG program met their need to engage in community service “very well” also rated environmental concerns as 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5. 67% of respondents who rated their opportunities for community service as “adequate” or “not enough” rated their unit’s attention to environmental concerns as 4 or 5 on the same scale.

EMG volunteers from urban units rate their involvement in environmental concerns as 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5 a bit more frequently than rural units:

Urban	84%
Rural	71%
Mixed urban/rural	78%

Volunteers from larger units and those who consider their units to be “very active” also rate their unit’s involvement in environmental concerns as more important to the work they do.

While most respondents indicate that environmental concerns are an important part of their unit’s work, the associated comments paint a different picture. The ratings were most likely a lot more aspirational than a reflection of how the units actually act. One comment, *“It’s VERY important to me but not important to my unit’s program,”* was echoed in many of the other comments.

It appears that most volunteers would like to see more focus on the environment within their units. To quote one respondent, *“Would like to see more emphasis on how we, as gardeners, can have a positive impact on the environment and how we can convey that to the public.”* Responses indicate a growing interest in native plants and other “climate-conscious” gardening practices.

From a broader look at the comments, one may conclude that EMG volunteers see this as a very important component of the mission of the program and would like their units to be more proactive in addressing the related issues. *“Would prefer to spend my volunteer energy on native plants, sustainable gardening and environmental education, NOT promoting growing grass or lawn care!”*

The comments reflect a fairly strong passion on the part of most respondents for this subject. *“As master gardeners we can make a difference caring for and teaching others to care for the soil, waste management, planting trees, water management, etc.”* And another, *“To some extent, I have been able to advocate against the widespread use of chemicals in our environment.”*

Environmental issues dotted responses to the open-ended last question of the survey, as well. Some units look at this as an overarching issue and some actually have specific projects with titles, like “Garden for Nature.” Most comments were of a quite proactive nature. Volunteers mentioned projects that help get native plants into the landscapes. One described the EMG volunteers’ role as *“educators with the goal of preserving our environment in a non-aggressive, community-friendly approach.”* Another volunteer commented that, *“The more we learn and feel confident sharing, ... the better we stand up to dangerous practices.”*

COVID seems to have given some EMG volunteers motivation (and perhaps time) to reconsider their program priorities with some current thinking and evidence in mind. *“During the pandemic ... evaluating everything we do ... put more emphasis on native plants, biodiversity, and support of the environment in our programming.”*

PART III – Observations and Implications

- What we found, what it means and what we do with it

There is clearly an interest among EMG volunteers to move forward with regard to environmental concerns. In response to the question that asked survey takers to identify the top

five EMG benefits and opportunities that they find most rewarding, “helping the environment” ranked third. 63% of respondents ranked it in their top 5.

Reexamining the Mission: With the urgency in public discourse and the heightened emphasis from the state EMG office, environmental concerns have risen to a priority status for the leadership in many EMG units. *“What inspires me most is the importance of our educational mission in this time of climate change and species decline.”*

For some units this will mean taking a closer look at all their projects and making adjustments with an eye toward more environmentally friendly practices. For others it will mean thoughtful planning to develop new programs that are especially oriented toward addressing environmental issues. And, for many units, it will be both. Two examples of unique programs are “Ecosavvy” at Green Spring and “H.O.P.E. from the Garden (Helping Our Planet Endure)” in Goochland-Powhatan.

The information reported in Chapter 6 indicates that the coordinating agent can have a significant impact on the nature of the EMG unit’s approach to environmental issues and the resulting initiatives to address those issues. As EMG units are reexamining the extent of their involvement in environmental matters, they should be sure to draw on the expertise and insights of their coordinating agents as a valuable resource. A forward looking, proactive coordinating agent will provide helpful guidance and connections with agencies having similar goals.

Native and Invasive plants: In response to the increasing interest in environmental issues, there is blossoming interest in providing *“native plants at affordable prices, along with information about why natives are so essential in our ecology.”* Several volunteers left comments about various types of exhibits/demonstrations that their units have developed to educate the public about invasive plants. Getting more native plants into our communities is one of the easier aspects of environmental responsibility. People love to plant new things and the idea of “native plants” is rather catchy. Removing invasive plants presents a greater, but still interesting, challenge.

“I wanted to transform some community property from invasive plants to native and didn’t know anyone or how to do it.” This volunteer took the training class and became involved with the EMG program on a broader basis while learning how to deal with invasive plants.

Many of the webinars that sprang up during COVID focused on native plants and other environmental issues. One series of note is the MGNV Friday morning webinar series that breaks down the various aspects of growing native plants and gives an in-depth description of each target area.

Recruiting and Fulfillment: *“I was actually reluctant to take the MG course for many years, because I expected it to place more emphasis on the use of chemicals, lawn care, etc. I was pleasantly surprised to see the emphasis on non-chemical, sustainable gardening methods, concern for building soils, and emphasis on understanding and protecting the ecosystem. I’ve followed organic practices and sustainable gardening since the 1980s, and felt more comfortable with the curriculum than I had expected.”* EMG volunteers reading this report will be

pleased to know that a new chapter on native plants has been added recently to the training manual. This supports the growing interest in environmental responsibility that is evident in the EMG program

“For me, I view the role of master gardeners as educators with the goal of preserving our environment in a non- aggressive, community friendly approach. It is in this way that I hope those we service will appreciate and join our goals in a more active way.”

The State Office supports the interest and passion EMG volunteers have for environmental sustainability, native plants, integrated pest management techniques, and more. We are inspired by their love for the earth and their communities and will continue to put energy behind bringing resources and training to help volunteers with these topics. One example is in the coming updates to the EMG Training Handbook. The chapter currently titled “Pesticide Use and Safety” has been rewritten and restructured to put emphasis on integrated pest management techniques. A new chapter focused solely on native plants will also be added to the handbook.

The Extension Master Gardener volunteer program is well situated to have an impact on environmental awareness and policies in communities around the Commonwealth. EMG volunteers are trusted members of their community, have connections to the latest research and university knowledge, have built countless community partnerships, and have a deep commitment to the care of our planet. The State Office looks forward to continuing to support environmental sustainability efforts within our units.

Appendix A

Getting Started:

Overview for MG Research Project Phase I – Focus Groups

This study is designed to collect information about the characteristics of MG units and the engagement of individual MG volunteers. As each focus-group question is presented, please think about the positive actions and conditions in your unit. The final report from this study will provide a consensus of our perspectives of successful MG endeavor.

There are so very many excellent MG projects around the state, and we have a variety of ways to recognize those important achievements. This study, however, will focus on the many underlying considerations rather than the results of the projects. How does the nature of your unit and of your individual volunteers create a stage on which these achievements are possible?

While we want to focus most of this conversation on the positive conditions, it may be important with each question to reveal a few things that you have tried that have not worked. These should be offered in the spirit of advice to others, not as a gripe session about your own unit.

Content Goals for Focus Groups:

Through the focus-group phase of this study we hope to glean useful information resulting in a broad view of personnel and organizational trends across the state. The questions prepared for the focus groups attempt to address two main areas of interest:

- What makes a happy and productive Master Gardener volunteer?
Engagement of individuals: Why and how do individuals engage in their units and how do the units work? What motivates individuals to invest in their organization?
- What makes a thriving and productive MG unit?
Characteristics of units: What are the characteristics of the units that best engage individuals in their programs? How do differently organized units manage to meet their goals?

Some things the Focus Groups are not:

- Analysis of any specific/individual unit
- Gripe session for venting frustrations
- Direct advice to any individual unit

Procedure

To answer the above areas of interest, each focus-group session will include eight specific questions, divided into four categories:

- Personal (engagement, fulfillment)
- Professional (experience/expertise, education)
- Unit Volunteer Activity (esprit de corps, structure, communication)

After a brief introductory period, each question will be allotted 10 minutes for discussion. It will be best if each participant can contribute to each question. At the end there will be a brief period for participants to add important issues/ideas that we have missed.

A recorder (person) will be present to note the main points on a flip chart. This will help us keep on track during the focus-group session and will be helpful in coordinating information later. The conversation will also be audio recorded for use in compiling the information.

The identities of individual volunteers and individual MG units will not be part of the final report.

Results

This focus group is the first phase of the research project. The second phase will be a survey distributed to all VCE MG volunteers with questions based on the results of the focus groups. Information gathered in the focus groups and in the survey will influence various aspects of the MG program and will be available for use by individual units.

We plan to offer an update at the Virginia Master Gardener College in June. The International Master Gardener Conference is coming to Virginia in 2121, and we hope to have a major presentation ready by that time. A written report will be posted on our Webpage.

Phase II – Surveys

The content of the survey will reflect the issues and questions that arise through the focus groups. All VCE MG volunteers will have the opportunity to contribute to this research project through the survey.

Appendix B

Virginia Master Gardener Research Project

Focus Group Questions

Personal

- 1. Engagement:** What is it about your individual Master Gardener program that inspires and excites you the most? What are the strategies for engaging volunteers (especially new volunteers) in specific projects/programs? Do you feel that your work is valued? Why? Why not?
- 2. Fulfillment:** How does the MG program meet your needs to engage in service? How else is it personally rewarding?

Professional

- 3. Experience/Expertise:** Are your knowledge, skills, abilities an important part of the work of your unit? Does your unit generally recognize the knowledge, skills, abilities that volunteers bring to your unit? As part of their continuing education do volunteers pursue advanced knowledge in specialized areas? If so, through what means?
- 4. Education:** How does your organization fulfill the educational mission of the Master Gardener program?

Break

Unit Activity

- 5. Team Spirit:** How are you part of the social fabric of your unit? How would you rate your unit's *esprit de corps*? How is it important in doing the work of your programs?
- 6. Organization:** How would you characterize the relationship between your agent and the MG unit? Do you have an association or not?
- 7. Communications:** How does your unit share information internally and externally? Do you believe it is effective? Why? Why not?

General

- 8. Connections:** What compelled you to get involved and keeps you involved with the MG program? Why do you think some folks leave the program?
- 9. Additional Considerations:** Afterthoughts and return to any topics

Appendix C

Survey of all Virginia EMG Volunteers

Conducted mid-summer, 2021

Extension Master Gardener Research Study

This research study was created to identify factors that characterize successful Extension Master Gardener (EMG) groups. As part of the study, focus group sessions have been conducted with a handful of units throughout Virginia. Those sessions helped to inform the questions presented in this survey. The results of this survey and the focus groups will allow us to better understand EMG priorities, recommend best practices, and potentially improve volunteer retention. We expect to share this information across Virginia and throughout the country with other EMG programs. Your thoughtful responses and input are valuable and we hope you personally will participate in this survey.

Instructions for completing the survey: Some questions have a list of options to select in response. Several of them ask you to choose up to 5 responses or check all that apply. Please carefully notice the directions provided for each question. Unless specified in the question, please select your one best response. Please choose the one that is closest to the way you would write your response. There is an optional comments box after each question. These provide an opportunity for you to share additional information pertinent to the respective question that may not be reflected in the response options provided. Please be generous in sharing your additional thoughts.

Please give your responses in a pre- and post-COVID light. Many things were different during that long year, and we prefer to have your responses as they relate to more normal times.

We thank you for your time and attention to this survey. It should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Questions can be directed to Kathleen Reed at reedka@vt.edu. This survey will be open through August 13.

Best,
The EMG State Office

Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with your involvement in your Master Gardener (EMG) Unit?

- ☐ Extremely satisfied
- ☐ Somewhat satisfied
- ☐ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- ☐ Somewhat dissatisfied
- ☐ Extremely dissatisfied

Comments:

What excites and inspires you most about the EMG program? Choose up to 5 of the most relevant to you.

- ☐ Meet new people
- ☐ Camaraderie / friendships
- ☐ Conversations with like-minded people
- ☐ Working on the projects I enjoy
- ☐ Diversity of projects / opportunities
- ☐ Projects working with children
- ☐ Great lectures and workshops
- ☐ Learning from other EMGs
- ☐ Appreciation of my work
- ☐ Opportunity to engage with the community ☐ Work valued by the community
- ☐ Teaching others
- ☐ Trying new things
- ☐ Consistent / good leadership
- ☐ Opportunities to engage in leadership
- ☐ Other (please note in the comments box)

Comments and other answers:

Did you have a mentor assigned to you when you joined the EMG program.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes,

How was your mentor helpful to you? Check any/all that apply. ☐ Helped me engage in the programs/projects

- ☐ Introduced me to people
- ☐ Answered questions
- ☐ Made me feel welcome
- ☐ Increased my confidence
- ☐ Other _____ ☐ None of the above

How would you rate your unit's mentoring program?

- ☐ Excellent
- ☐ Average
- ☐ Needs work

Given your unit's projects and opportunities, how easy is it for you to meet the EMG volunteer-hours requirements? (minimum of 20 volunteer hours per year)

- ☐ Very easy: plenty of opportunities from which to choose
- ☐ Easy: I have enough opportunities to complete my hours
- ☐ Not so easy: I have to search for opportunities
- ☐ Difficult: Opportunities don't match my availability.
- ☐ Very difficult: There are little or no volunteer opportunities available

Comments:

How easy is it for you to achieve your required 8 hours of continuing education each year?

- ☐ Very easy: plenty of opportunities provided by my unit
- ☐ Easy: I have enough opportunities to complete my hours
- ☐ Not so easy: I have to search for opportunities
- ☐ Difficult: Opportunities don't match my availability.
- ☐ Very difficult: There are little or no opportunities available

How well does the Master Gardener program meet your need to engage in service and to give back to the community:

- ☐ Very well
- ☐ Adequately
- ☐ Not enough. I would like to do more

Comments:

Which of these do you find to be the most personally rewarding? Check up to 5 of the most relevant to you.

- ☐ Learning opportunities, expanding horizons
- ☐ Intellectual challenges
- ☐ Projects coming from volunteers' initiatives
- ☐ Developing new skills
- ☐ Getting outdoors
- ☐ Finding purpose in retirement or outside of the workplace
- ☐ Opportunities to volunteer in areas of interest
- ☐ Neighbors asking for help
- ☐ Watching excitement grow in new gardeners
- ☐ Helping the environment
- ☐ Getting children outside
- ☐ Growing food for the food bank or other such organizations
- ☐ Other _____

Comments and/or other answers:

On a scale of 0-5, how important are environmental concerns to your unit's programs/projects?
(0 is not important at all, 5 is very important.)

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Not important at all Moderately important Very Important

Comments:

As you learn new skills as an Extension Master Gardener, which best describes your relationship with your unit with regard to the knowledge, skills and abilities you brought when you joined?

☐ I am able to use my previous knowledge, skills and abilities in support of the work of the MG unit.

☐ I would like to contribute more of my previous knowledge, skills and abilities in support of the work of the unit.

☐ I prefer to leave my previous work behind.

Comments:

Does your MG unit have a speaker's bureau?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I'm not sure

If yes,

Please indicate which best describes your involvement with the speaker's bureau.

☐ It's one of my favorite programs in our unit, and I am available for multiple topics.

☐ I have prepared at least one topic and have presented it.

☐ I'm interested, but have not yet done a presentation.

☐ I don't wish to do public presentations.

☐ Other _____

Does your MG unit have a plant sale?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I'm not sure

If yes,

How do you make it an educational event? Please check all that apply. ☐ Signs with plant information

☐ Plants presented sorted in clear categories

☐ Tags in each pot with information

☐ EMG volunteers offering information to customers as they are browsing

- ☐ Answering questions about plants
- ☐ Concurrent events (seminars, lectures, etc.)
- ☐ Other (please note in the comments box below)

Comments and additional answers:

Check all the following activities that are important means through which your EMG unit provides community education/outreach. Please use the "Comments" box to list other public education projects/activities that are important to your unit.

- ☐ Major Master Gardener public event, full day or multiple days (ex. Spring Garden Fest, Garden Faire)
- ☐ Plant Sales
- ☐ Help Desk
- ☐ Plant Clinics
- ☐ Children's programming
- ☐ Social media educational content
- ☐ Garden tours
- ☐ Written articles, regular newspaper publications, etc.
- ☐ Webinars
- ☐ Speakers Bureau
- ☐ Demonstration gardens
- ☐ Plant workshops / hands-on programs
- ☐ Other (indicate in box provided below)

Comments and/or additional answers:

On a scale of 0-5, in your opinion, how important are social engagement and camaraderie with other Extension Master Gardeners in accomplishing the work of your unit?

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Not important at all Moderately important Very important.

Comments:

When do most of your new volunteers first get involved in your unit's projects? ☐ During the training class

- ☐ During their internship
- ☐ I'm not sure
- ☐ Other time frame (Please explain in the comments box below)

Comments:

Does your unit have an association?

- ☐ Yes

- ☐ No
- ☐ I'm not sure

If yes,

How would you characterize your association's leadership?

- ☐ Strong leadership - plenty of volunteers willing to step up and take responsibilities
- ☐ Good leadership – good people can easily be recruited to take responsibilities
- ☐ Adequate leadership – most leadership positions get filled, eventually
- ☐ Weak leadership – some leadership positions are not filled

Does your unit have an overseeing Extension Agent?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I'm not sure

If yes

How would you describe your agent's general involvement with your MG unit?

- ☐ Not involved
- ☐ Somewhat involved
- ☐ Very involved

On a scale of 0 to 5, how receptive is your Extension Agent to ideas generated by Master Gardeners?

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Not receptive

Extremely receptive

On a scale of 0 to 5, how responsive, helpful and willing to answer questions is your Extension Agent?

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Not receptive

Extremely receptive

What are the most effective forms of communication for your MG volunteers to communicate with each other (internal communication)? Choose up to 5 of the most frequently used by your unit.

- ☐ Regular meetings (monthly, quarterly, etc.)
- ☐ Phone calls
- ☐ Emails
- ☐ Newsletter
- ☐ Social media: Facebook, Instagram, etc.

- ☐ Through project / team leaders
- ☐ Online zoom meetings
- ☐ Mentors keep in touch
- ☐ Internal website
- ☐ Signup Genius
- ☐ Doodle polls
- ☐ Other (please note in the comments box)

Comments and/or other answers:

What are your unit's most effective form of communication with the community (external communication)? Choose up to 5 of the most relevant to your unit.

- ☐ EMG unit Webpage
- ☐ EMG newsletter for the community
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Other social media _____
- ☐ Newspaper
- ☐ Community electronic networks (ex. neighborhood communication, NextDoor, etc.)
- ☐ Talking to neighbors (word of mouth)
- ☐ Fliers posted in the community
- ☐ Extension office email list
- ☐ Extension newsletter
- ☐ EMG maintained email list
- ☐ Published materials available at demonstration gardens
- ☐ Other (please note in comments box)

Comments and/or other answers:

What drew you to the Master Gardener Program? Check all that apply.

- ☐ Read Extension publications and/or attended EMG recruiting events
- ☐ Motivated by another gardener, friend, or persuasive person
- ☐ Knew about the training class and was eager to learn more about gardening and landscaping
- ☐ Was looking for new opportunities and personal connections
- ☐ Other _____

Comments and additional answers:

Which best describes your personal engagement with the Master Gardeners in Virginia?

- ☐ I participate in statewide opportunities such as Virginia Tech or Virginia Cooperative Extension Webinars, the Virginia Master Gardeners Association, Extension Master

Gardener College and others

☐ I would like to participate in more of the statewide opportunities.

☐ I prefer to take advantage of opportunities mostly within my own unit

Comments:

The purpose of this research project is to shine light on the best qualities and practices of Extension Master Gardener units in Virginia. Please note other strengths and successes in your unit that you would like the researchers to consider.

=====

Unit Demographic Information

The following questions are optional and related to your EMG unit and personal demographics

Which best describes your EMG unit?

☐ Rural

☐ Urban

☐ Mix of urban and rural areas

How many volunteers comprise your EMG unit?

☐ Fewer than 50

☐ 50-100

☐ 101-200

☐ More than 200

How would you describe your EMG unit?

☐ Very active

☐ Moderately active

☐ Not very active.

On average, about how many volunteer hours do you contribute the Extension Master Gardener program in a year?

☐ 20-50

☐ 51-100

☐ 101-250

☐ 251-1,000

☐ 1,001 or more

Age ☐ 18 and under ☐ 19-30

☐ 31-40

☐ 41-50

☐ 51-60

☐ 61-70-80

☐ 71-80

☐ 81 and over

Gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is your employment status?

- ☐ Work full time
- ☐ Work part time
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Other _____

Ethnicity

- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Non-Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ I prefer not to answer.

Race

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ More than one race
- ☐ I prefer not to answer.

Appendix D

Virginia Extension Master Gardener Demographic Information

Q50 - Age

#	Answer	%	Count
1	18 or under	0.00%	0
2	19 - 30	0.55%	7
3	31 - 40	1.74%	22
4	41 - 50	4.83%	61
5	51 - 60	10.94%	138
6	61 - 70	45.01%	568
7	71 - 80	33.28%	420
8	81 or over	3.65%	46
	Total	100%	1262

Q51 – Gender

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Male	18.37%	230
2	Female	79.71%	998
3	Non-binary / third gender	0.16%	2
4	Prefer not to say	1.76%	22
	Total	100%	1252

Q52 – Employment Status

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Work full time	12.72%	164
2	Work part time	8.84%	114
3	Retired	73.78%	951
4	Other	4.65%	60
	Total	100%	1289

Q53 – Race

#	Answer	%	Count
1	White	82.95%	1022
2	Black or African American	2.35%	29
3	American Indian or Alaska Native	0.24%	3
4	Asian	0.57%	7
5	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.16%	2
6	More than one race	2.19%	27
7	I prefer not to answer	11.53%	142
	Total	100%	1232

Q54 – Rural or Urban Unit

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Rural	24.94%	324
2	Urban	31.41%	408
3	Mix of urban and rural areas	43.65%	567
	Total	100%	1299

Q55 – Size of Unit

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Less than 50	15.90%	196
2	50 - 100	35.60%	439
3	101 - 200	35.28%	435
4	More than 200	13.22%	163
	Total	100%	1233

Q56 – Volunteer Hours

#	Answer	%	Count
1	20 - 50	41.26%	524
2	51 - 100	28.90%	367
3	101 - 250	19.06%	242
4	251 - 1,000	10.00%	127
5	1,001 or more	0.79%	10
	Total	100%	1270

Q57 – Unit Activity

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very active	60.86%	782
2	Moderately active	35.95%	462
3	Not very active	3.19%	41
	Total	100%	1285

Q58 – Ethnicity

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Hispanic or Latino	1.15%	14
2	Not Hispanic or Latino	85.91%	1043
3	I prefer not to answer	12.93%	157
	Total	100%	1214

Appendix E

Mission, Vision, Values of the EMG Program

MISSION

Sharing Knowledge

Empowering Communities

VISION

To be the Virginia Cooperative Extension volunteer organization extending horticultural and environmental outreach across the Commonwealth

CORE VALUES

Respect

The environment, each other, and those we serve

Accountability

Wise stewardship of resources

To our organization, our community, and each other

Collaboration

Willing to work with a diverse group to reach a common goal

Actively seeking out partners

Appendix F

Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Units

VEC Units – Counties, Cities Leadership Center in bold	Association
Albemarle County , Charlottesville City	Piedmont Master Gardener Association
Arlington County, Alexandria	Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia (MGNV)
Appomattox County	Master Gardeners Association of Appomattox County
Bedford County	Bedford Area Master Gardener Association (BAMGA)
Brunswick, Lunenburg, Mecklenburg, Nottoway Counties	South Central Master Gardener Association (SCMGAVA)
Buckingham , Cumberland, Prince Edward Counties	Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners Association (HOVMGA)
Chesapeake	
Chesterfield County	
Clarke, Frederick , Page, Shenandoah, Warren Counties	Northern Shenandoah Valley Master Gardeners Association (NSVMGA)
Culpepper , Greene, Madison, Orange County	Rapidan River Master Gardeners
Danville City	Danville Master Gardeners Association
Dinwiddie County	
Fairfax County	Fairfax County Master Gardeners Association (FCMGA)
Fairfax County	Green Spring Gardens Master Gardeners
Fauquier , Rappahannock Counties	Master Gardeners of Fauquier and Rappahannock Counties (MGFRC)
Fluvanna County	Fluvanna Master Gardeners
Franklin County	Franklin County Master Gardeners
Gloucester County	Gloucester Virginia Master Gardeners

Goochland, Powhatan Counties	Goochland-Powhatan Master Gardeners Association (GPMGA)
Greenville County, Emporia City	
Halifax County	Southside Master Gardeners Association (SSMGA)
Hampton City	VCE Hampton Master Gardeners
Hanover County	Hanover Master Gardeners Association (HMGA)
Henrico County	Henrico Master Gardeners (HMGA)
Henry County , Martinsville City	Henry County Martinsville Master Gardener Association
Isle of Wight , Southampton, Surry Counties	Western Tidewater Master Gardeners
James City County , Williamsburg City	James City County Williamsburg Master Gardener Association (JCCWMGA)
Lancaster, Northumberland , Richmond, Westmoreland Counties	Northern Neck Master Gardeners (NNMG)
Lee County	
Loudoun County	Loudoun County Master Gardeners (LCMGA)
Louisa County	Central Virginia Master Gardeners
Lynchburg, City ; Amherst, Campbell Counties	Hill City Master Gardeners Association (HCMGA)
Matthew, Middlesex Counties	
Montgomery , Floyd, Giles, Pulaski Counties	New River Valley Master Gardeners (NRVMGA)
Nelson County	Nelson County Master Gardeners
Newport News City	Newport News Master Gardener Association - NNMG
Norfolk City	Norfolk Master Gardener Association (NMGA)
Northampton, Accomack Counties	Eastern Shore of Virginia Master Gardener Association
Patrick County	Patrick County Master Gardeners

Portsmouth	Portsmouth Master Gardeners (PMG)
Prince George County, Petersburg City	Prince George Master Gardener Association (PGMGA)
Prince William County	The Master Gardeners of Prince William (MGPW)
Richmond City	RVA Master Gardeners
Roanoke , Craig, Botetourt, Counties; Roanoke City	Roanoke Master Gardener Association (RMGA)
Rockbridge , Bath Counties	Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners Association
Rockingham , Augusta Counties; Harrisonburg, Staunton, Waynesboro Cities	Central Shenandoah Valley Master Gardener Association (CSVMGA)
Russell County	Russell County Master Gardeners
Scott	
Smyth	
Stafford , Caroline, King George Spotsylvania Counties; Fredericksburg City	Master Gardener Association of the Central Rappahannock Area (MGACRA)
Suffolk	Suffolk Master Gardeners Association (SMGA)
Tazewell County	Tazewell County Master Gardeners
Virginia Beach	Virginia Beach Master Gardeners (VBMG)
Washington County	Washington County Master Gardeners Association (WCMGA)
Wise County	
Wythe, Bland Counties	Wythe-Bland Region Master Gardener Association
York , Poquoson Counties	

Appendix G

Code of Virginia - Title 2.2 Administration of Government

Chapter 36. State of Government Volunteers Act

§ 2.2-3600. Short title; declaration of legislative intent.

A. This chapter may be cited as the Virginia State Government Volunteers Act.

B. Since the spirit of volunteerism has long animated generations of Americans to give of their time and abilities to help others, the Commonwealth would be wise to make use of volunteers in state service wherever practically possible. Effective use of volunteers in state service, however, requires that state agencies be provided guidelines for the development of volunteer programs and the utilization of volunteers. The General Assembly intends by this chapter to assure that people of Virginia may derive optimal benefit from volunteers, and that the time and talents of volunteers in state service may be put to their best use.

1977, c. 347, § 2.1-554; 2001, c. [844](#).

§ 2.2-3601. Definitions.

As used in this chapter, unless the context requires a different meaning:

"Department" includes all departments established in the executive branch of state government and local agencies under the jurisdiction or supervision thereof, and for the purposes of §§ [2.2-3602](#), [2.2-3604](#) and [2.2-3605](#), shall include political subdivisions of the Commonwealth.

"Material donor" means any person who, without financial gain, provides funds, materials, employment, or opportunities for clients of agencies, instrumentalities, or political subdivisions of the Commonwealth;

"Occasional-service volunteer" means any person who provides a one-time or occasional voluntary service;

"Regular-service volunteer" means any person engaged in specific voluntary service activities on an ongoing or continuous basis;

"Volunteer" means any person who, of his own free will, provides goods or services, without any financial gain, to any agency, instrumentality or political subdivision of the Commonwealth;

"Volunteer in state and local services" shall include, but shall not be limited to, any person who serves in a Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) unit or on a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) while engaged in emergency services and preparedness activities as defined in § [44-146.16](#).

1977, c. 347, § 2.1-555; 1979, c. 131; 2001, c. [844](#); 2005, c. [474](#).

§ 2.2-3602. Scope of chapter; status of volunteers; reimbursements.

A. Every department, through its executive head, may develop volunteer programs and accept the services of volunteers, including regular-service volunteers, occasional-service volunteers, or material donors, to assist in programs carried out or administered by that department.

B. Volunteers recruited, trained, or accepted by any department shall, to the extent of their voluntary service, be exempt from all provisions of law relating to state employment, hours of work, rate of compensation, leave time, and employee benefits except those enumerated in or consistent with § [2.2-3605](#). Volunteers shall, however, at all times comply with applicable work rules.

C. Every department utilizing the services of volunteers may provide volunteers with such incidental reimbursements as are consistent with the provisions of § [2.2-3605](#), including transportation costs, lodging, and subsistence, as the department deems appropriate to assist volunteers in performing their duties.

D. For the purposes of this chapter, individuals involved in emergency services and preparedness activities pursuant to the definition of "emergency services" in § [44-146.16](#) shall be considered volunteers in state and local services and shall be accordingly entitled to the benefits conferred in this chapter. As volunteers in state and local services, such individuals shall be deemed to be regular-service volunteers.

1977, c. 347, § 2.1-556; 2001, c. [844](#); 2005, c. [474](#).

§ 2.2-3603. Responsibilities of departments.

Each department utilizing the services of volunteers shall:

1. Take actions necessary and appropriate to develop meaningful opportunities for volunteers involved in its programs and to improve public services;
2. Develop written rules governing the recruitment, screening, training, responsibility, utilization and supervision of volunteers;

3. Take actions necessary to ensure that volunteers and paid staff understand their respective duties and responsibilities, their relationship to each other, and their respective roles in fulfilling the objectives of their department;
4. Take actions necessary and appropriate to ensure a receptive climate for citizen volunteers;
5. Provide for the recognition of volunteers who have offered exceptional service to the Commonwealth; and
6. Recognize prior volunteer service as partial fulfillment of state employment requirements for training and experience established by the Department of Human Resource Management.

1977, c. 347, § 2.1-557; 1979, c. 107; 1991, c. 563; 2000, cc. [66](#), [657](#); 2001, c. [844](#).

§ 2.2-3604. Solicitation of aid from community.

Each department may, through the officer, agent, or employee primarily responsible for the utilization of volunteers in that department, solicit volunteers and voluntary assistance for that department from the community.

1978, c. 121, § 2.1-557.1; 2001, c. [844](#).

§ 2.2-3605. Volunteer benefits.

A. Meals may be furnished without charge to regular-service volunteers if scheduled work assignments extend over an established meal period. Meals may be furnished without charge to occasional-service volunteers at the discretion of the department's executive head.

B. Lodging, if available, may be furnished temporarily, at no charge, to regular-service volunteers.

C. Transportation reimbursement may be furnished those volunteers whose presence is determined to be necessary to the department. Rates or amounts of such reimbursement shall not exceed those provided in [§ 2.2-2823](#). Volunteers may utilize state vehicles in the performance of their duties, subject to those regulations governing use of state vehicles by paid staff.

D. Liability insurance may be provided by the department utilizing their services both to regular-service and occasional-service volunteers to the same extent as may be provided by the department to its paid staff. Volunteers in state and local service, including, but not limited to, any person who serves in a

Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) unit or on a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), shall enjoy the protection of the Commonwealth's sovereign immunity to the same extent as paid staff.

1977, c. 347, § 2.1-558; 1979, c. 131; 2001, c. [844](#); 2005, c. [474](#).

Definitions

Advanced training – classes or seminars with content above the level of the training class – 8 hours required annually of each volunteer

Appreciative Inquiry – method of research designed to help participants uncover existing strengths, advantages, and opportunities in their communities, organizations, or teams.

Associations – means for volunteers to organize in support of their EMG unit. As defined in the EMG Coordinator's Manual, "Appropriate activities for an association are recreational and social exchange among volunteers; professional development by conducting educational programs for volunteers; and activities to make it possible for volunteers to better reach their goals (for example grants/fundraising for attending educational events or for establishing EMG educational programs). EMG associations do not sponsor public horticulture education events, but rather they educate the public about VCE and EMGs and provide management structure to facilitate VCE educational programming. Additionally, new EMGs are trained through VCE. Members of Associations often coordinate and participate in training of new EMGs but in doing so, they are serving in their role as an EMG not as a member of an association."

Better Impact – information management system used by VA EMG program; includes communications systems, records (including MG volunteer hours), etc.

Coordinating agent – main connection between the EMG unit and the state EMG office – may be the local extension agent, a volunteer coordinator, a paid coordinator, the district director, and in some cases a combination of these.

EMG – Extension Master Gardener

EMG - Standing

Trainee – first phase of a volunteer's commitment to the EMG program – 50 hours of classroom instruction in various horticultural subjects – first involvement in the unit's programs/projects

Intern – second phase of a volunteer's commitment to the EMG program, begins at the end of the training class – interns contribute a minimum of 50 volunteer hours to the program through their unit's programs/projects (Some of the 50 hours should have been completed during the training class.)

Volunteer – after completing the training class and the internship the new volunteer is welcomed into the unit. In order to remain in good standing, volunteers contribute at least 20 hours of service and acquire at least 8 hours of advanced training each year.

Expertise – high level of knowledge and skills in a particular area – for EMG volunteers, the "go-to person" in an area of horticulture

Focus Group – small number of participants with similar interest convened to respond to specific researcher-posed questions. Used to provide better understanding of participants perceptions of shared experiences.

Food Security – UN definition: “...all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.” Many EMG units that have demonstration gardens that produce food donate some or all of the harvest to a local food pantry or similar program.

Help Desk – EMG volunteers devoted to answering questions posed by volunteers of the public by phone, email, in person, or other means – willing to do the research to answer hard questions

Invasive Plants – Their first home was somewhere else in the world. – plants that were brought to Virginia by humans (accidentally or on purpose), have escaped cultivation and are causing harm in nature.

KSA – Knowledge, skills and abilities

Lewis Ginter Garden – 50-acre botanical garden in Henrico County featuring over a dozen themed gardens, a conservatory, library and special interest classes

Master Gardener College – 2 ½-day intensive advanced-training opportunity for EMG volunteers organized by the state EMG office with assistance of EMG volunteers – usually held on the VA Tech campus

Master Naturalists – sister program to the Master Gardeners – volunteer educators, citizen scientists, and stewards helping Virginia conserve and manage natural resources and public lands.

Mentors – seasoned volunteers assigned to guide/coach/befriend each new recruit. About half of the VA EMG units have mentorship programs. These programs vary widely in content and success. The subject of mentoring is currently of special interest to the EMG State Office.

MG Board – governing board made up of the elected officers and the coordinating agents of an association [association defined above?]

Native Plants – evolved in the specific region where they are currently growing – plants that have evolved over thousands of years together with the regional fauna and are part of the balance of nature – “...those that have evolved and adapted to a specific location and have remained genetically unaltered by humans.” (Wasowski)

Plant Clinic – usually a display, exhibit or presentation at a public event (e.g. farmers’ market) staffed by volunteers who offer help desk services

Pollinator garden – popular choice for demonstration gardens, designed to attract beneficial insects, butterflies and hummingbirds – usually showcasing native plants that provide pollen, nectar and habitat to native fauna

Sign-up Genius – online sign-up system that allows for easy coordination of groups or events - includes automated emails and text reminders

Therapy garden – demonstration garden devoted to addressing mental or physical health challenges – Several VA EMG units have developed model therapy gardens.

Unit – distinct organizational groups making up the program. Some units include as many as 5 counties, and some are individual counties. For information about the unit structure, see Appendix F

VMS – Virginia Volunteer Management System – previously used organizational information management system no longer in service – replaced by Better Impact (BI)

Volunteer – person who provides resources and time toward the good of the organization or cause – EMG volunteers provide gardening education to their communities. See Appendix G for the Code of Virginia Volunteerism Act.