



Virginia Cooperative Extension

# Master Gardener Program

## 2024 Annual Report

# State of the State Extension Master Gardener Program

## State Office update

The EMG State Office ended 2024 fully staffed for the first time in the last few years. We look forward to greatly expanding our capacity in 2025 by adding a new student worker position, embarking on a new effort to make expanded programmatic materials available to volunteers, and revamping our continuing education offerings.

Not reflected in the following data is the large amount of work it has taken to organize and stabilize the administrative functioning of the State Office after long position vacancies and a period of transition. As this work comes to an end, please expect to see a more streamlined approach to communications and administration.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the dedication and support of Virginia's 4,000+ EMGs! Thank you!

## Endowed Fund

The Virginia Master Gardener Association Endowed Fund ended 2024 with a market value of \$664,059 with deferred commitments totaling \$583,386. Thank you to all past and future donors! The Virginia Master Gardener Association Endowed Fund ensures that the State Coordinator, and other State Office positions, will remain funded and permanent. Income from our Endowed Fund pays a substantial portion of all State Office positions, and the capacity of our office would be greatly reduced if not for the tireless work of devoted volunteers who set up the Virginia Master Gardener Association Endowed Fund 19 years ago and the ongoing generosity of our donors. Thank you!

Sincerely,



Grace Stern  
Extension Master Gardener  
State Coordinator



Ed Olsen  
Extension Master Gardener  
Program Director

# 2024 at a glance

**4,365**  
Volunteers

**465,919**  
Volunteer  
hours

**851,299**  
Direct  
contacts

## Program Area

## Hours

Economic Value of Horticulture	11,334
Environmental Stewardship	57,202
Food Security	16,583
General Outreach and Education	134,670
Human Health	3,528
Volunteer Management/Administration	102,718
Youth & Horticulture	19,685
# inVAsives	66,532

Total value of volunteer service  
**\$15,603,627<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Based on a value of volunteer service of \$33.49 from Independent Sector

**900+**

New EMGs trained

**584**

Trainees enrolled in  
Canvas courses

**1,403**

Handbooks purchased

**700+**

Volunteers reached  
milestones

**49**

Water Stewards  
completed training



## Continuing Education

**Extension Master Gardener College** ran from June 5-9 and was held online via Zoom events. Sponsors included the American Horticultural Society, Cross Creek Nursery and Greenhouse, Merrifield Garden Center and 11 local EMG associations.

**859**

Volunteers attended virtual EMGC

**The monthly webinar series** resumed in 2024 with 8 sessions and an average attendance of 103 volunteers per session. Guest speakers included Paul Westervelt of Saunders Brothers Inc., Andy Rollins of South Carolina Extension, and Lauren Taylor of Blue Ridge PRISM.

**103**

Average attendance at webinars

**Leadership Development training** was held in person at locations in Bedford, Richmond, Culpeper, and Wakefield, VA. Topics included unit support, communications best-management-practices, a review of the Task-force on Accessibility and Connection, and project management. Twelve EMG volunteers also presented “lightning talks” describing local projects.

**106**

Volunteers attended in-person Leadership Development sessions around Virginia

**Water steward training** was held virtually through July and August. In total, 49 volunteers (80% of those who registered) completed training.

**49**

Volunteers completed water steward training

*Pictured above: Volunteers watch a speaker at the Bedford, VA Leadership Development session*



## Micro-grant Program

The micro-grant program funded four local projects related to the year-long focus theme #inVASives.

**\$3,005**

Distributed for local projects

**100%**

Of applications full or partially funded

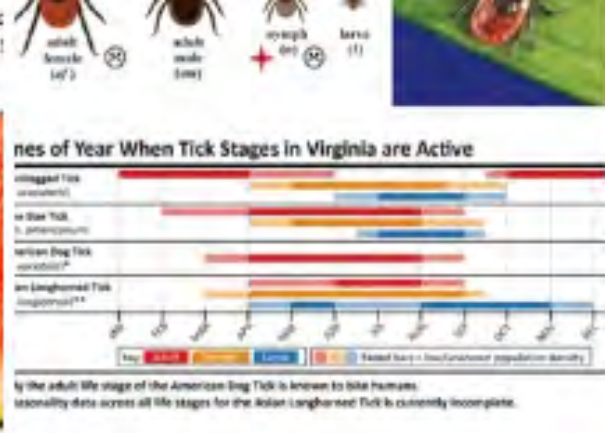
## Project Spotlight: Rapidan River Invasive Species Removal Training

“At the end of the day things will be better because you did something, even if it’s a small better,” said Anne Marie Pfaff, a Rapidan River Extension Master Gardener,

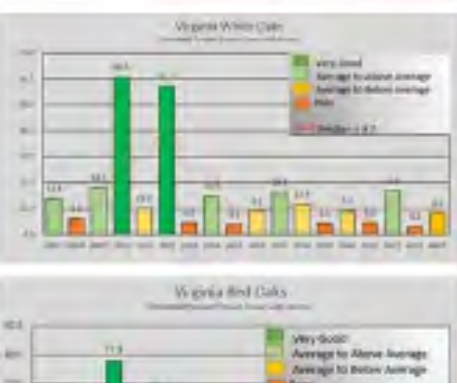
As part of the Rapidan River Master Gardener unit, Pfaff recently organized and led a workshop teaching members of her community how to control the highly invasive tree-of-heaven, a species of tree native to China that rapidly spreads in Virginia ecosystems, competing with native species and even cultivated crops.

The workshop, organized in partnership with Blue Ridge Prism, addressed how to identify tree-of-heaven, how to use pesticides safely, and how to use the “hack-and-squirt” method to kill the trees. Supplies and take-home materials for participants were funded by donations to the Extension Master Gardener program received during Virginia Tech Giving Day.

*Pictured above: Attendees at the Rapidan River invasive species removal workshop learn from a speaker.*



Harvest when fully mature (skin can't be pierced with a thumbnail)  
 Handle carefully to avoid cuts and bruises which can provide entrances for various rot-producing organisms  
 Leave a 1 inch stem on each fruit  
 After harvesting, cure winter squash at a temperature of 80 to 85°F and a relative humidity of 80 to 85 percent (do NOT cure acorn squash)  
 After curing, store winter squash in a cool, dry, well-ventilated location. Storage temperatures should be 50 to 55°F. Do not store squash near apples, pears, or other ripening fruit.



Looking for native landscape plants

Virginia



## Communications

In 2024 we launched our new Consumer Horticulture newsletter, publishing five editions. Our social media presence continued to grow, although total reach numbers are lower for 2024 than for 2023 due to the virality of a handful of 2023 posts. Total social media reach was 3,724,335 across all platforms. YouTube videos logged 53,278 views, with 14 new videos added in 2024.

Our most popular Facebook post was about callery pear trees, with a total reach of 935,153.

We published eight stories via VT News on a variety of topics including callery pear trees, cicadas, and mums. Story pickup was good, with most stories picked up by at least one state-wide media source, and a few picked up by national news sources.

**26,622,500**

Total unique monthly page views for the organizations that picked up our stories in the months our stories were picked up

**3,724,335**

Total social media reach

**81,933**

Unique page views on the "Lawn and Garden" suite of pages on ext.vt.edu

**FOUR REASONS CALLERY PEARS ARE THE WORST TREES**

*We are begging you to stop planting these!*

- Cutting them down doesn't kill them.** Callery pears are very hard to control. If you cut the stem back at ground level, it will still grow from the root, so if you do do it, cut the plant back, not kill it.
- They can develop GIANT spiky thorns.** Seedlings can have significant thorns, almost like a honey locust, which makes them very hard to remove. The thorns will even pop trees!
- They split, posing danger to surrounding buildings and the landscape.** The trees grow very fast and tend to have very upright branches prone to inclusion that can cause the tree to split.
- They spread easily, causing biodiversity loss.** Ornamental plantings of Bradford pear often produce fertile seeds that are readily spread by birds. There are now some roadside areas that are 100% Callery pear.

**CALLERY PEAR ALTERNATIVES**

Pyrus calleryana, or Callery pear, is a species of pear native to parts of Asia. Popular cultivars of the Callery pear, such as the 'Bradford' pear, have been widely used as ornamental landscape trees since the 1970s.

**A FEW ALTERNATIVES:**

- Japanese tree lilac, *Syringa reticulata*
- Tatarian maple, *Acer tataricum*
- Amur maackia, *Maackia amurensis*
- Adirondack crabapple, *Malus 'Adirondack'*
- Flowering dogwood, *Cornus florida*
- Serviceberry, *Amelanchier* spp.
- Green hawthorn, *Crataegus viridis*
- Chokecherry, *Prunus virginiana*
- White Fringe tree, *Chionodoxa virginiana*

FOR MORE INFORMATION: resources.vt.edu

## Honors & Recognition

The Extension Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia won a **2024 SERVE Award** for their Youth Education Program (YEP) which brings horticulture education to local elementary school students.

The YEP program serves schools and other youth organizations in Alexandria City, Arlington County, and Falls Church City by bringing in Extension Master Gardener volunteers to teach the fundamentals of gardening and environmental sustainability.

The key to the YEP program's success is an easy-to-understand, SOL-focused curriculum developed by retired teachers turned Extension Master Gardeners Anne Reed and Debbie Keefe.

"This program not only supports the social-emotional health of Arlington and Alexandria students by providing outdoor enrichment, but it has also changed the lives of our volunteers," said Kirsten Conrad, Arlington County Extension agent. "This is a truly impactful program."

## Coordinator Spotlight

Kirsten Conrad, ANR Extension agent in Arlington County, has worked with the Extension Master Gardener program for 15 years.

Under Kirsten's tenure, the Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia have grown in membership, projects, and reach. Kirsten oversees one of the commonwealth's largest EMG programs, with more than 200 volunteers. Kirsten is also the chapter advisor for the Arlington Regional Master Naturalists.

"Kirsten is creative and fun to work with; she is truly a resource for our team of horticulture agents in the commonwealth," said her colleague Adria Bordas, Extension agent in Fairfax County.

On behalf of Virginia's EMG program, congratulations Kirsten!




Extension Master Gardeners Anne Reed and Debbie Keefe used their experience as retired teachers to develop the YEP program.

*"YEP's genuine care for our community of learners, carefully crafted lessons, and commitment to the ideals of the gardening program have allowed our entire school community to flourish. I know that YEP has had the same impact in numerous other schools in our community."*

**- Ashley Snyder**  
Teacher at Alice West Fleet Elementary School

Kirsten Conrad (below) has worked with EMGs for 15 years.



The background of the page is a warm, orange-toned photograph of a person in a forest. The person is holding a large, thick tree branch horizontally across their chest. The scene is softly lit, creating a serene and natural atmosphere. The text is overlaid on the lower right portion of this image.

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