

## The First Nationally Unifying Mission Statement and Program Standards for Extension Master Gardener Programs at Land-Grant Universities

### Abstract

Started in 1973, by 1996 the Extension Master Gardener (EMG) program had been independently established in all 50 states. It was not until 2006 that an Extension Master Gardener National Committee was formed to facilitate cooperation, communication, and collaboration among EMG programs. In response to requests from EMG coordinators, a task force was appointed to develop nationally relevant resources and a set of national program standards to support and guide EMG Programs. Here we report on the development and adoption of national program standards and a unifying mission statement for EMG Programs in the United States.

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### Brief History of Extension Master Gardener Programs

Prior to the 1970's, Extension horticulture programs were focused on crop production. However, in the early 1970s, Washington State University Extension responded to increased public demand for gardening information via the formation of an urban horticulture program (Gibby, Scheer, Collman, Pinyuh, & Fitzgerald 2008). Initial urban horticulture programs delivered gardening information via mass media, which may have further increased public demands on Extension for gardening information, resources and programs (Gibby et al., 2008).

David Gibby and Bill Scheer (who were then Washington State University Extension agents) proposed recruiting and training volunteers who could respond to gardeners' questions as a way to serve the needs of home and community gardeners (Gibby et al., 2008). Although this idea was initially met with skepticism by some, the first Master Gardener training classes were offered to about 200 people in King and Pierce counties in 1973 (Gibby et al., 2008).

Since that time, the program has endured and expanded. Today, Master Gardener programs are active

in all 50 states, nine Canadian provinces, and in South Korea (Table 1). Most of these Master Gardener programs were well established by the time the Extension Master Gardener Program National Committee (EMGNC) formed in 2006 (Extension Master Gardener Program National Committee, 2014). The EMGNC facilitates national cooperation, communication, and collaboration among Extension Master Gardener programs.

**Table 1.**

History of Master Gardener Programs in the United States and Beyond

<b>State, Territory or Country</b>	<b>Year Master Gardener Program Started</b>
Washington	1973
Nevada <sup>1</sup> , Ohio <sup>2</sup>	1974
Colorado, Illinois	1975
Idaho, Nebraska, Oregon	1976
Minnesota, New York, Rhode Island, Wisconsin	1977
Alaska, Connecticut, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Oklahoma	1978
Florida, Georgia, Iowa, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia	1979
Arizona, California, Utah <sup>3</sup>	1980
Alabama, Kansas, New Mexico, South Carolina	1981
Hawaii, Maine, North Dakota <sup>4</sup> , Pennsylvania	1982
Missouri	1983
New Jersey, Wyoming, Massachusetts, Ontario	1984
South Dakota, Tennessee	1985
Delaware	1986
Arkansas	1988
Kentucky <sup>5</sup> , Mississippi, Ohio <sup>2</sup> , Vermont,	1991
Nevada <sup>1</sup>	1992
New Hampshire, West Virginia	1993
Louisiana	1994
North Dakota <sup>4</sup>	1996
Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward	2007

Island, Newfoundland, Quebec	
Manitoba, British Columbia	2010
Alberta	2011
South Korea	2012
<p>1Nevada's Master Gardener Program was launched in 1974 in the northern part of the state. The program was launched in the southern part of the state in 1992.</p> <p>2Ohio's Master Gardener Program was launched in 1974, disbanded in 1976 and re-launched in 1991.</p> <p>3Utah's Master Gardener Program was launched sometime in the 1980s. No specific year was available.</p> <p>4 North Dakota's Master Gardener Program was launched in 1982, disbanded in 1988, and re-launched in 1996.</p> <p>5Kentucky's Master Gardener Program was launched sometime in the early 1990s. No specific year was available.</p>	

The endurance and expansion of the Extension Master Gardener (EMG) model are a testament to the program's impact and success. However, the independent adoption of the Master Gardener Program model by individual states, territories, and regions has occurred in the absence of a unifying mission or set of program standards. Although there is great value in providing for flexible programming, many EMG Coordinators at the state and local level have called for greater guidance on program policies.

The call for greater guidance may be due in part to the traditional training model for Extension faculty. Most EMG Coordinators developed expertise in a horticulture content area (e.g., entomology, botany, etc.). Relatively few have experience or education directly relevant to managing and administering volunteer outreach programs (Boyd, 2004), including core competencies in volunteer leadership (Cummings 1998) or conflict management (Fry & Langellotto, 2013). In addition, the funding climate for Extension programs across the nation has meant that more volunteers are taking on responsibilities that were previously reserved for Extension faculty and staff. Such volunteer "middle managers" have the potential to maintain or expand the great work of the Master Gardener program, especially during tight fiscal times (Cassill, Culp, Hettmansperger, Stillwell, & Sublett, 2012).

### **Extension Master Gardener National Committee Task Force**

At the 2012 National EMG Coordinators' Conference held in Spokane, WA, attendees voiced strong support for the formation of a task force that would work on developing resources that would support county and state EMG volunteer management and program administration.

The following topics were identified as being the most important to develop national guidelines for or information about:

- Recruitment, selection and placement of EMG volunteers
- Development and retention of volunteer leaders
- Interpersonal relationships, volunteer interactions, conflict management
- Program evaluation

In addition to these program management topics, numerous requests were made for:

- Developing national standards for EMG volunteer programs
- Developing an online repository for EMG resources

The EMGNC responded by appointing a task force to work on these issues.

Within the task force, subcommittees were set up to:

- Draft and revise a national EMG mission statement
- Draft and revise national standards for MG programs
- Decide on the best site to use for an EMG online resource repository
- Draft and revise an online repository of EMG resources.

Upon considering the potential value of national standards for EMG programs, we realized that EMG programs are not united under a common, national mission. Thus, together with our proposed list of national standards, we developed a mission statement. We gathered input from current EMG coordinators and volunteers, prior to and during the development of our recommendations.

## **A National Mission and Set of Standards for Extension Master Gardener Programs**

The proposed mission and standards were accepted by the EMGNC in January 2014 with minor edits. These mission and standards can be found below, as well as on the online resource repository (Resources for Extension Master Gardener Coordinators, 2014) that we continue to develop.

### **Our National Mission**

Extension Master Gardener programs educate people, engaging them in learning to use unbiased, research-based horticulture and gardening practices through a network of trained volunteers directed and supported by land-grant university faculty and staff.

### **Our National Standards**

Extension Master Gardener programs are networks of land-grant university-trained volunteers, distinguished by the standards listed below. To achieve greater consistency in program management and the volunteer experience across the Extension system nationally, state Extension Master Gardener programs will strive to meet these standards and ensure they are reflected in the statewide program.

### ***Program Structure and Expectation Standards***

- Has an established statewide organizational system
- Establishes state program goals that align to achieve the EMG program mission
- Engages in Extension-approved projects and programs designed to educate the public about horticulture and gardening
- Is accountable to state Extension leadership and local stakeholders
- Shows documented educational impact in local communities that demonstrates behavior change and public value
- Follows the Equal Opportunity Guidelines for their state and/or university

### ***Volunteer Management and Preparedness Standards***

- Uses recognized volunteer management practices
- Incorporates a system for volunteer leadership and development
- Uses an established state training curriculum (a suggested core curriculum includes Botany, Physiology, Soils, Basic Pathology, Entomology, Weeds, IPM, Vegetables, Fruits, Turf, Woody Ornamentals, Herbaceous Ornamentals, Composting, Diagnostics and Troubleshooting, Planting and Maintenance, Introduction to Extension Master Gardener Program, and Record Keeping and Reporting)
- Requires a measurement of volunteer competency following completion of state training program
- Requires volunteer service hours; 40-hour volunteer service minimum in the initial training year and 20-hour volunteer service minimum in subsequent years
- Requires annual continuing education and professional development hours; 10 hours minimum annually in years following initial training
- Uses an annual recertification criteria and process

## **Implications and Future Work**

EMG programs will not be demoted or otherwise penalized if local programs do not meet these standards. Instead, the standards set a bar against which EMG programs could judge their performance, or which EMG programs could work towards, if they have not yet met a specific standard.

These standards apply only to EMG programs in the United States. They do not apply to EMG programs outside of the United States or to non-Extension programs. Future work can include the designation of another committee to fold Canada, South Korea, and non-Extension programs into the mission and standards described in this article.

It is our hope that the newly adopted mission statement will foster a national sense of purpose across EMG Programs in the United States and that the newly adopted national standards will provide better guidance to and promote consistency. However, there is much work that remains, in terms of creating research-based and/or peer-validated resources in best practices in volunteer program management and administration. Our current and future work is focused on developing an online resource repository (Resources for Extension Master Gardener Coordinators, 2014) that houses peer-validated resources in: program planning; engaging and teaching adults/youth; recruitment, selection, and placement of MG volunteers; development and retention of volunteer leaders; conflict management; program evaluation; fostering diversity. A future article will highlight the development, launch, and maintenance of this website.

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