

Eco-tip: Master Gardener trainees sought

David Goldstein

Special to Ventura County Star

University of California's Cooperative Extension in Ventura County has opened a training opportunity and will accept up to 40 new applicants to become master gardeners. Master gardeners develop expertise and use their knowledge to educate the public.

Master gardeners also have great social gatherings centered on food more delicious than is available from any restaurant, as I found out when my wife was a master gardener. She brought me to some of their potluck events featuring homegrown and home-cooked delicacies made from the freshest possible ingredients, including produce picked only hours before and delicate varieties that could never survive the packing, shipping and storage requirements of markets.

"The training is intense," said Jill Tyler, program coordinator. "We are making ... we hope, long-term investments in volunteers who will stay active with us for years."

The average master gardener volunteers for nine years, according to Tyler. This spring, the program honored four 20-year master gardeners, and Tyler is preparing a recognition event for the local program's first master gardener to reach 30 years of service, Charles Duncan.

The 150 active master gardeners are making a tremendous environmental contribution, each performing at least 25 hours of public service per year. Service includes helping home gardeners learn to make compost, use mulch, plant native species, revive dying plants and trees, irrigate efficiently and grow fruits and vegetables.

Master gardeners also manage eight demonstration gardens throughout Ventura County and assist with development of a new farm in Camarillo. The 114-acre Camarillo farm replaces Faulkner Farm in Santa Paula, previously headquarters of the master gardeners and other UC Cooperative Extension programs.

The program's speakers bureau hosted 51 classes last year and gives free presentations at public libraries, senior centers and other locations. Master gardeners also attend community events and festivals to distribute information



Master gardeners at the Hansen Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Santa Paula. Some 40 master gardener applicants are being sought by Ventura County's UC Cooperative Extension program. PROVIDED PHOTO/BOB CAREY

and give away plants. The program won first prize at the Ventura County Fair this year for a display of water wise plants.

Since the pandemic, the program's Home Gardener Helpline became an email address rather than a staffed phonebank. Questions sent to mgventura@ucanr.edu are answered by master gardeners who help people with problems ranging from stinky compost piles to pest infestations to pruning techniques. I recently sent the helpline a photo of a volunteer plant sprouting in my garden and found out it was an unusually shaped, but edible, tomatillo. I tended the plant and now have delicious, homegrown additions to my salads.

Tyler's own story provides a good example of how some people start with the program. She attended a master gar-

dener training on succulents at the Oxnard Historic Farm Park. There, she saw flyers about master gardener training and signed up to be notified of the next recruitment.

Due to the pandemic, she had to complete her last four classes online and her graduation was a socially distanced drive-through event. However, she immediately experienced the camaraderie of the group, even during adversity. Members of the program's education committee brought balloons, graduation certificates and gifts, handing these to the graduates in their vehicles attached to the handles of rakes.

Due to her decades of nonprofit and government program management and fundraising, she immediately accepted an appointment to be co-chair of the executive committee. A couple years later, she accepted the paid position as pro-

gram coordinator. Tyler says it is a great job "because of the volunteers I get to collaborate with every day. Master Gardeners really are the best people — and the best cooks and bakers too!"

Applications to become a master gardener are available only to those who first attend an informational meeting. Applicants may attend one of two in-person sessions, from 10 a.m. to noon on Sept. 5 or 2-4 p.m. on Sept. 6, in the California Room of UC Cooperative Extension, 669 County Square Drive in Ventura. Alternatively, applicants may attend via Zoom at 6 p.m. on Aug. 28.

Details are available at ucanr.edu/sites/VCMG.

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