



VIRGINIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

TASK FORCE ON ACCESSIBILITY AND CONNECTION



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Thank you to the volunteers and Extension employees who serve on the Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Task Force on Accessibility and Connection:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historically, the demographic data on our volunteers in Virginia has been incomplete at best. However, we are beginning to get a better understanding of the demographic composition of our volunteers statewide with the recent implementation of Better Impact as our volunteer management system. This new system will help us create a more complete and comprehensive overview of our volunteer base. If the diversity of the volunteers is not representative of the larger community, then how are we truly meeting the needs of our local communities? In order to effectively meet the needs of our changing communities, our volunteer base needs to be able to reach all segments of the local community. Therefore, the Task Force was created to identify and minimize barriers to entry into the Extension Master Gardener volunteer program. Another explicit goal identified by the Task Force is to improve the overall accessibility of the EMG volunteer program.

The EMG state office team decided to form a Task Force on Accessibility and Connection to look into and address the long-term uniformity within Virginia's EMG volunteer program. Local agents were approached to suggest names of local EMG volunteers who would potentially be interested in serving in this capacity. The Task Force is composed of VCE faculty, staff, and volunteers and they represent diverse geographies and EMG units. We also have representation from Virginia State University and a former administrator within the Virginia Tech Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The Task Force met bi-weekly from February to early May.

The overarching barriers identified by Task Force members as impediments to underrepresented segments of their communities becoming Extension Master Gardener volunteers include time, finances, geography, a negative perception of the program, and poor volunteer retention of minority community members. After a failed attempt to address inclusivity at an agency level centered around the concept of parity, more and more units and volunteers have shown deep concern about the lack of broader representation among local volunteers. The Task Force provides the vehicle to approach this topic meaningfully and direct the EMG program toward specific action and improvement.

Key impediments to underrepresented segments of our communities becoming Extension Master Gardener volunteers:

- **Time**
- **Finances**
- **Geography**
- **Negative perception of the program**
- **Poor volunteer retention**

The purpose of this Task Force is multifaceted. The group provides space for a collective and intentional internal reflection (state office) as a program to determine what we can do to strive for improvements. This is important both for the state office and the overall program at the local level. Tackling the issue of a lack of representation also ensures we identify any overt or covert programmatic issues which discourage participation by a diverse group of volunteers. A task force approach creates space for volunteers to provide critical feedback on the program's successes and failures, share possible solutions, and request state-level support to achieve greater programmatic diversity. Lastly, it allows the state office to receive feedback on barriers to entry that can be addressed and potentially resolved.

Some of the overarching goals we hope comes from this process and the Task Force include the creation of:

- Measurable outcomes to track progress and successes in focused areas of improvement,
- Actionable items Extension Agents, EMG Coordinators, and current EMG volunteers can implement in their local EMG volunteer program, and
- A collection of suggested practices and resources for field use and implementation.

We intend to incorporate findings from the Task Force into upcoming handbook and online training updates, both of which are already underway.

Six focus areas have been identified and will be elaborated upon further in the document. These areas cover the barriers within our Program as identified by the Task Force. As we move forward with implementing changes in these focal areas, we expect the following outcomes:

- The importance of relationship building and community building within the EMG Program will be emphasized at the state and local level.
- New training resources that address the broader topic of inclusivity and embracing diversity through deliberate intent and action will be developed for local implementation.
- Local units will be empowered to take on this topic organically and not wait for the state EMG office or VCE to tell unit offices how or what should be done. The process of diving into conversations of diversity and accessibility has great value and may lead to unanticipated positive consequences which can be shared throughout the state.



Learning about pH at James Madison Middle School, Roanoke Master Gardeners

FOCUS AREAS

1. RECRUITMENT

Background

Before anyone applies to and goes through the training program, they are introduced to the Extension Master Gardener Program and Virginia Cooperative Extension through local recruiting efforts. These efforts can have a tremendous impact on perceptions of the program, understanding of what the program is, and whether or not they could see themselves as an EMG. Understanding best practices for recruitment and helping to lower barriers of entry to our program can help increase program diversity.

Recommendations

Marketing and Outreach: During the Task Force meetings, it became clear that there is often the perception that gardening expertise is required to

become an EMG. The State Office will work with local offices to dispel these misconceptions through marketing campaigns focused around EMG training and what it means to be a VCE Master Gardener.

Lower barriers to entry: There are many identified barriers to entry to the EMG Program. In order to help reduce those barriers, the State Office will continue to increase the availability of online training options for new trainees. A longer period for completing internship hours will also be established. The State Office will also work to increase the availability of scholarships to cover the new trainee Program Fee.



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

2. APPLICATION PROCESS

Background

The application process is an important part of new Extension Master Gardeners' first interactions with the Program and people in their local unit. With this understanding, the Task Force recommendations focus on standardizing the interview process and finding a way to increase community connections through new trainees.

Recommendations

Service project recommendation component of application process: A question will be added regarding opportunities applicants see in their community for service or service learning for training class and the larger local EMG program. We recognize that applicants/trainees have a wealth of information they bring with them into our program,

even if they are not experienced gardeners. Their community connections and ideas for projects could help to engage trainees from the very beginning and help establish new opportunities for the EMG program.

The EMG State Office will provide guidance for the interview process: In order to help standardize the interview process throughout the state, a sample script and suggested questions document will be created for applicant interview use. Recommendations for conducting interviews will also be created in order to ensure volunteers are clear on what it means to be an EMG and to help interview panels think through how they're making applicants feel welcome during this process.

3. HANDBOOKS

Background

There are a number of resources available from the State EMG Office to assist volunteers in their learning and Agents/Coordinators as they manage local programs. These documents help guide individuals with their programming and can be important resources. The Task Force and State Office sees a number of updates that can be made with these resources to further their usefulness. An additional handbook will also be created to assist with the programming side of EMG work.

Recommendations

EMG training handbook: The training handbook will be updated, made to be accessible to ADA standards, and will be established as a gardening resource for everyone in Virginia, not just EMGs. The handbook will be available as an online textbook, PDF, and hard copy to meet the needs of all. In addition to the formatting change and general edits, quizzes will be moved out of the handbook and moved to another document or made interactive in PressBooks, our online textbook program. A chapter on native plants will also be added to the updated handbook.

New handbook content will also be created to focus on diverse gardening traditions. These will be formatted as call-out boxes and incorporated throughout the training handbook. Call out boxes will include: lost crops of Africa research, Japanese gardening traditions, indigenous gardening, and crops of the world.

New Internal Training Handbook: A new internal manual for volunteers will be created. Topics covered in this handbook will include: Intro to being an EMG, how to be an educator, working with your community, leadership, marketing and advertising, community gardens, school gardens, and help desks. This handbook will include sections on:

- Customer service and creating welcoming environments
- Community outreach, especially reaching diverse communities
- Importance of service to community and best practices for building relationships within communities

Coordinator Manual: The coordinator handbook will go through an update process to increase useability and address issues and policy changes discussed

during Task Force meetings, including the following:

- Editing of the tardiness/absenteeism policy during training and as a volunteer
- Building strong mentoring programs
- Community outreach, including how to reach diverse communities
- Interview guide for recruitment process
- Mentoring new trainees

Accessibility and Inclusion of Handbooks and Publications:

- A team will be created to focus on translating the top publications into most common languages spoken in Virginia.
- A team will be assembled to review the inclusiveness of the training handbook, errors or discrepancies will be reviewed by a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion staff person.

4. TRAINING

Background

Extension Master Gardener Training is crucial to EMG program success. Not only do trainees get a baseline of important knowledge that they'll use to conduct programs, but this is also where the foundation of understanding of the program and connections with their peers begins. A good training experience can have a positive impact on volunteer satisfaction and can often increase volunteer retention.

Recommendations

Orientation: Orientation is an important part of a trainees learning about the EMG program and Virginia Cooperative Extension. In order to help with this process, the State Office will help build out resources for units to use. This will include creating an online site/module for orientation resources and rewriting the "Welcome to VCE Master Gardening" document (to be included in the new volunteer

handbook).

Training Class Cohesion: During Task Force meetings, it was observed that cohesive training classes tend to retain volunteers while some less cohesive classes have high levels of loss. In order to help increase training class cohesion and camaraderie, the following will be done:

- Develop guidelines or recommended methodology to encourage collaborative problem solving among volunteer classes. This could include:
 - A group project as part of the internship
 - Focus on in-person labs designed to facilitate teamwork and collaboration
 - Collaborative online working groups (e.g. a case study where a group does an environmental assessment, solves a help desk scenario)
- Develop recommendations that make training more group focused and help build relationships, for example:
 - Field trips
 - Service learning (e.g. water quality lab could be shoreline restoration)
 - Use recommendations from application “service learning recommendations” to determine service learning opportunities for the training class
- Develop a customer service training for all EMGs to build skills for interacting with the public and cultural sensitivity
- Develop and provide resources and materials for diversity trainings which go beyond civil rights compliance

Mentoring: Mentoring has been shown to be

an important part of helping a new volunteer feel comfortable with the EMG organization and to begin their engagement with volunteering opportunities. With this in mind, the State Office will improve resources and develop a framework for mentorship programs that partner new trainees with EMGs. This will be housed in the updated Coordinator Manual.

Training Classes: Units should reflect on each of the below aspects of training in order to help meet the needs of their potential applicants/trainees.

- **Format:** In-person vs. virtual (asynchronous or synchronous) vs. hybrid
- **Timing:** Training classes should be offered at flexible times and in different locations from year to year.
- **Location:** Does the location of the training present geographical barriers? This may include such issues as lack of nearby public transportation, out of the way location to many potential trainees, location that isn't ADA accessible, etc.

Online Training: To help with virtual options for training, the State Office will develop a fully online training option as a solution for smaller units who do not offer training every year or those individuals transferring in from other states.

Focus on the importance of the EMG group and the service the Program provides by creating a community organization for our volunteers. The EMG Program does not just offer value to the community through the services offered, it also provides a valuable community connection and sense of purpose to our volunteers. The social aspect of our groups should be emphasized throughout the year to keep the social cohesion and camaraderie levels high.

5. PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Background

The State Office guides many of the recommendations that are put in place at the local level. As we work to increase diversity in our programs throughout the state, there are steps the State Office can take to help break down barriers and increase accessibility to the program.

Recommendations

Absenteeism/Tardiness: In the past, trainees have only been allowed to miss three classes. To increase flexibility and lower barriers to completing training, the limit for missing classes will be removed. In circumstances where a student misses class, the class can be made up by completing the equivalent online Canvas course. Local agents or coordinators must provide an alternative for unit-specific classes that are missed. Tardiness should not be an excuse to remove someone from training or make them complete a full make up course. If tardiness is a perpetual issue with a specific trainee, a time should be set aside to have a conversation about what may be going on and how the unit office can assist. Flexibility and understanding should be used with volunteers, especially if they are making an effort.

Exit interview: The State Office will develop an exit interview process for EMGs who leave the program. Data will be collected by the state office, not through local programs.

Gardening Labor vs. Education: Volunteers should not be viewed as free labor to the community, however there are cases where manual labor will be part of educational programming. With this in mind, the State Office will revise the policy about volunteer hours parameters, especially for projects that focus on food production.

Program Environment: An environment where kindness is rewarded/celebrated should be created and sustained.

Hours opportunities for full time employees: Encourage more volunteer opportunities for people who work full time, especially evening and weekend opportunities

Internship period: Agents should allow 18 months to complete the initial 50 volunteer hours; for extenuating circumstances, this can be reviewed on a case-by-case basis for possible extension with explicit expectations or milestones being met.



Carrollton Learning Garden, Western Tidewater Master Gardeners

6. VOLUNTEER PROJECT RESOURCES

Background

Engaging with the community and meeting community needs is central to the EMG Program. In order to help increase local programming around important issues, the State Office will work to assist local programs with program and funding opportunities when possible.

pursue partnerships with FCS agents and Master Food Volunteers. This will help to further VCE's reach in the community and increase programmatic impact, from garden to plate.

Recommendations

Grant funding: The State Office will work to identify potential sources of financial resources for school/ community gardens. The State Office will also work to build internal funding so that microgrants can be offered to local EMG units to assist with the building and maintenance of school and/or community gardens.

Master Food Volunteers and Family & Consumer Sciences Partnership: Food and agriculture are closely tied, especially at the home garden level. Although there are a few groups already pursuing these partnerships, it is recommended that EMG units throughout the state begin conversations and

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

As of January 2022, this report is being released to Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener volunteers.

The TAC remains active and has contributed feedback and recommendations to this report. We welcome additional comments, considerations, and concerns.