

Meet the GSEMG Class of 2021!

By Kay Gill and Ellen Perrine

Following the all virtual 2020 Green Spring Extension Master Gardener (GSEMG) training course, the GSEMG Training and Development Team gained more flexibility in structuring the 2021 program thanks to the development of vaccines, coupled with a more in-depth understanding of the characteristics of Covid and its associated risk factors. The 2021 course syllabus was structured as a hybrid virtual/in-person classroom learning environment restoring staff-trainee interaction and hands-on learning opportunities, while complying with all federal, state and local Covid guidelines.



Class of 2021

The effectiveness of this hybrid learning environment was multiplied by another GSEMG training first. Under the leadership of Tom Sparks, GSEMG Training and Development Chair, nearly 20 team members developed and integrated relevant 2021 course content into the Virginia Tech CANVAS Learning Management System. This “one-stop shop” for learning was a game changer for both trainees and staff. Trainees could access all GSEMG course material (including course overviews and reading assignments), take quizzes electronically, and provide timely feedback for staff on each class.

The members of the Class of 2021 bring a diverse body of knowledge, professional and life experience, individual interests, and gardening expertise to the program. Their individual profiles highlight this diversity and interest. The 2021 interns look forward to working side by side with you as they acquire additional gardening expertise and the required number of volunteer hours for certification as Extension Master Gardeners. They are excited to be joining this wonderful group of talented, dedicated people providing services that impact our community directly, whether it is raising food for others, helping to protect native plants and pollinators, educating others about the value of trees, or ensuring the health and beauty of natural habitats that surround us.

Here's your chance to get to know them!

Cissy Ayona

I retired in 2021 after a long career with a defense contractor. I balanced stressful assignments by lots of hiking near and far. Spending time in nature is always the great equalizer for me. Several years ago, I joined Fairfax Tree Stewards and through them I learned about the Extension Master Gardener program. I have been "eyeing" the program since 2015.



I have lived in Northern Virginia since 1980 in Arlington, Falls Church, Vienna, Sterling, Manassas, Clifton, and Chantilly. I love the unprecedented amount of parkland that Fairfax County offers, including its trails and recreational centers.

I don't have a very long gardening history — I grew up in a city — but I hope to rectify this now that I have more freedom. I have a pretty good collection of indoor plants, and friends tend to think I can fix their plants, which turns my house into a bit of a plant hospital ward. I am working at having a wildflower/meadow area in my backyard this year and am very excited to see what blooms. Beehives are not out of the question, either!

I have a long list of activities I am planning to start, including shadowing a master carpenter to learn how to build things and painting murals, starting with my shed.

The GSEMG program has been a terrific experience, and I look forward to meeting members in person and spending time with the public, spreading the knowledge. I will be volunteering with the Wellness team and the High Tech team.

Leslie Byers

My work background has been varied. I was a social worker for 12 years and am now an administrator at Georgetown University. I also have been a gardener at an herb greenhouse, worked on a kibbutz, and picked fruit all over Europe. I'm employed full time, though my schedule is very flexible, especially in summer, to pursue other interests.



I was an “army brat,” so I’ve lived in many places. I was born in Germany, lived there again as a teenager, and have lived in many US states. My parents retired here and, following college at the University of Utah, I made Virginia my home as well.

I grew up with gardens, thanks to my parents who were avid gardeners and park enthusiasts (my dad even has a small Fairfax County park named after him). I had a communal vegetable garden in college. I’m dedicated to perennials and natives now and am expanding my knowledge of pollinators. I also have a small vegetable garden, though it is now in containers.

I’m interested in starting community gardens in areas of Fairfax County that don’t have easy gardening options or affordable fresh food sources. I’m very interested in helping with the Demonstration Gardens, Wellness Circle, and Library Outreach teams.

I have traveled solo to Mexico, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, New Zealand, and the South Pacific. I still travel every chance I get and would love to go to Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Because I love to travel, my gardens must be forgiving!

Cassandra Cooke

I developed a disinterest in gardening at a young age. One of my earliest gardening memories was when Mother showed me how to weed the vegetable patch, and then sent forth my five-year-old self armed with a trowel and a bucket. I vigorously dug up and pulled every fleck of green I saw. When she came out to inspect my work, instead of the praise I expected, I got a vigorous spanking. Dad marched us kids through poison ivy and stickers to plant dozens of fruit trees to achieve his dream of creating an orchard that never grew, no matter how many trees we planted. Now that I know more about gardening, I realize that you have to actually “do stuff, like ... oh, watering!"



I moved around the world most of my life as a dependent, and later, on military tours and with the Foreign Service. Almost everywhere I lived, many of the local people distrusted store-bought remedies and made their own medical concoctions

from local herbs and flowers. Still, I had no interest in growing anything until I moved to the edge of the Sahara. There were almost no plants or trees where I lived. There was just dirt that sprouted grass for a few weeks if it rained that year. That's when I developed a desire to grow things.

Now that I am retired, I am grateful for the opportunity to give back to the greater community through gardening. This year I am volunteering with the Edible Garden and the Wellness Circle teams.

Maryam Dadkhah

I am a private-practice registered dietitian/nutritionist with 25+ years of experience. I am the president of Eatwellguru LLC, established in 2014. I am also a board-certified specialist in obesity and weight management, a certified diabetes educator, and a certified personal trainer. I have lived in Northern Virginia on and off since 2007, with some gaps while pursuing my PhD in Nutrition Science at Colorado State University and teaching at the State University of New York.



Since I was a toddler, I have been playing in the garden, planting seeds, and playing with insects and wildlife. For years, I was passionate about house plants and small flower beds. Right after the pandemic, I gave a presentation about climate change and food to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at George Mason University, which was the turning point in my interest in native plants.

Living next to Wildwood Park in Vienna since November 2020, I am turning some of our lawn into native meadows and am planting natives all over our property. I keep compost bins and have two rain barrels. I also replaced invasives with natives in my mom's and sister's gardens. Meanwhile, I help the Town of Vienna with its restoration efforts to remove invasives and plant natives, especially in Wildwood Park.

I have joined the Edible Garden, Help Desk, Zoom Programming, Photography, and Wolf Trap teams. In my spare time, I enjoy playing the piano and am working on classic pieces such as Bach's English Suite No. 3, Liszt's Liebestraum No. 3, and Camille Saint-Saens' Danse Macabre.

Karen Dominick

I grew up in central Pennsylvania and earned degrees from Penn State and Virginia Tech. In 2020, I retired as an elementary school teacher from the Prince William County Public Schools.



I have always liked to “putter around” outside, but I did not have any garden training until I went through the GSEMG program. My primary interest is vegetables, but I want to expand my gardening experience based on what I learned last Fall. So far, I have removed two kinds of invasives, enlarged the existing flower beds, and set up grow lights in a corner of my kitchen to grow spinach, lettuce, and herbs in the winter. With my husband’s help, we are enlarging the vegetable garden, installing raised beds, creating a new flower bed along one side of the vegetable garden after removing turf, and hoping to install some type of irrigation.

I have joined the Wellness Circle, Edible Demonstration Garden, and Youth and Family Education teams. When not gardening at home or with GSEMG, I volunteer at Gunston Hall doing historical research, read, craft, go on lots of walks with our dog, and plan trips in our RV.

Sarah El-Zoghbi

Realizing I have a passion for all things gardening, in 2021 I jumped in the deep end and decided not only to volunteer as a Master Gardener but also to enroll at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) to pursue a degree in Landscape Design and Horticulture Technology. This past year has been so incredibly fulfilling because of my involvement with the GSEMG program and NOVA.



I’ve been a stay-at-home mom to my three wonderful boys for the past 13 years (ages 13, 10, and 4), so this has all been a big change for me and my family. It’s been amazing seeing my kids and husband cheer me on through it all! I love how my programs at NOVA and GSEMG mesh so well and how my education from both programs strengthens my knowledge and experience in amazing ways.

I've been gardening for over a decade, teaching myself as I go, step by step, making mistakes and learning from it all. I have a BA in Psychology and a background in education, so helping people learn has always been part of my life. I love sharing gardening and planting knowledge!

I am looking forward to volunteering and educating the public about such an important subject that I also happen to be so passionate about. Landscape design and architecture is also a big passion of mine: I can go on and on about Olmstead, Farrand, Oudolf, Bargmann, Andersson, and many more!

Kay Gill

Growing up in central Pennsylvania, I was surrounded by beautiful flower, vegetable, and fruit gardens. My parents regularly won blue ribbons for their roses at the Harrisburg Rose Show. Unfortunately, I did not inherit their green thumbs, but I do have their love of flowers.



I have lived in Virginia since graduate school. My career began as a special education teacher in rural Virginia. I'll never forget my district superintendent telling me that the children I taught would "never amount to anything" and that the only reason he hired me was fear of losing federal funding. Realizing the power of law to change lives, I went to law school, and the rest is history. I've combined my interest in education and law for 42 years as an attorney at the US Department of Education.

In preparation for retirement, I joined GSEMG. Although I have a tremendous amount to learn, I've been buoyed by the veteran Master Gardeners' enthusiasm and willingness to share their knowledge. I am a member of the *Groundbreakers*, Publicity, New Class Support, Youth and Family Education, and Wolf Trap teams.

Debi Guido-O'Grady

When I retired from US government service in 2019, I told everyone I knew that beekeeping was my next life adventure. And off I went to get the lowdown from several urban and country beekeepers in Northern Virginia who shared with me all aspects of beekeeping – what it takes to feed, raise, protect against predators, and battle yukky viruses – and why beekeeping was not for me! But I came to a new realization that *feeding the bees* – as well as other pollinators and birds – was a realistic and just as noble retirement pursuit. I won a slot in the Master Gardener course, and my future has begun.



I am delighted with what I have learned about sustainable gardening and hope to use my public diplomacy skills as a 30-year veteran US Foreign Service Officer to share this knowledge with the public in Fairfax County. I want to help promote the concept of planting native plants and trees to nurture honeybees, as well as the hundreds of species of native bees that have suffered so much from the twin evils of habitat loss and climate change. I recognize I have much to learn about raising *native* species but hope that my familiarity dealing with *foreign* species of the human variety will fortify this goal. I look forward to amplifying the message of sustainable gardening and promoting a healthier world for all. I will be contributing to the *Groundbreakers* newsletter, Publicity, and High Tech teams.

Phil Kemelor

Inspired by publications such as *The Mother Earth News* and *Organic Gardening and Farming*, I started my first vegetable garden and compost pile when I was 17. Since then, I've tried growing edibles wherever I've lived, including Brooklyn NY, Durham NC, and Berkeley CA. At my home in the Lake Barcroft neighborhood, I'm striving to create a front yard edible and ornamental garden that attracts bees, birds, and pollinators – as I deal with the challenges of living with partial shade, an imposing Black Walnut tree, and a cast of cute but hungry deer, squirrels, and chipmunks.



For my internship, I've joined the *Groundbreakers*, Garden Talks, and Demonstration Gardens teams. I led off the Garden Talks program on Jan. 29 with a presentation on garden makeovers.

I recently decided to stop working. Whether this is retirement, a sabbatical, or a time out, I haven't yet decided. I started my career as a journalist, migrated into marketing, and then had a 25-year career as a digital strategist and analytics consultant with startups, boutique consulting firms, and companies including Verizon and Ernst & Young. I was an early advocate for the use of digital analytics and have written books and spoken internationally on this topic. In addition to working, I've been active in my community, having served on the board of Wesley Housing Development Corporation and as a founding member of the Glover Park Main Streets program. I currently serve on the board of Fairfax Families for Safe Streets.

I briefly worked as a craps dealer and cab driver in Reno and, while on a work/study program in Israel, worked with a Berkeley University-trained agronomist on cutting-edge hydroponics for growing food in the desert. I learned how to drive a tractor, too!

Lexi Keogh

I grew up in Minnesota with parents who enjoyed gardening of all kinds but, for the most part, I was a reluctant weed puller and lawn mower. I moved to the DC area for college and have lived here for the most part ever since. I have worked with many nonprofits over the years, most of them focusing on conservation or the arts (and in some cases, both)! I currently work as a pruner for Yankee Clippers, which I love, because I get to see all kinds of amazing gardens.



My own garden is a work in progress. As my knowledge grows, I am gaining more confidence. I've mostly concentrated on houseplants and containers in the past, but am looking forward to doing more to invigorate my cookie-cutter suburban yard. I am excited to be working on the School Garden Advisory and Youth and Family Education teams.

Min Lee

My name is Min Lee, but my friends call me Mina. I grew up in Seoul, South Korea, and came to the United States in the early 1980s. I have lived in Fairfax for nearly 40 years, except while pursuing a graduate degree in Washington DC. I have been working in scientific research areas and later moved into the higher education field.



My entry into the Master Gardener program stemmed from backyard gardening and evolved into my curiosity about growing healthier crops. I hope that the GSEMG program will connect my love of learning and sharing my knowledge with others.

My husband and I recently celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary, and we have one son. When I am not working, I am busy giving art tours at the National Gallery of Art. I also enjoy baking, reading, and traveling. I am on the Youth and Family Education and the Adopt A Library teams.

Jennifer Mendez

No information available.

Ellen Perrine

I spent my early life in southwestern Ohio, near Cincinnati and in Dayton. My mother had a flower border around our house that she lovingly tended, but I didn't get involved in gardening until I had a home of my own.



My work life in Ohio centered on strategic planning and product management for high-technology products, until I decided to move to Northern Virginia 34 years ago for a position as an account executive for an online services company. After several sales and business development positions, I became a consultant, helping government contractors write proposals to win federal government contracts.

It was in my small townhouse garden that I began gardening in a meaningful way. I started out as a generalist but quickly learned the value of perennials, which I chose carefully. Numerous classes at Merrifield Garden Center helped me increase

my knowledge base. I also learned about the value of native plants and the importance of pollinators and plan to add native plants to my garden over time.

I retired from my consulting company in 2019 and in 2020, like all of us, I came face to face with the pandemic. I wanted to enroll in a Master Gardener program in retirement and the Green Spring program came along at just the right time. I will be working on the Wolf Trap team and assisting with the *Groundbreakers* newsletter, while gaining further expertise, making friends, and having fun.

A lifelong learner, my other interests are foreign languages, history and culture, international travel, music, photography, needle arts, cat rescue, and collecting Christmas ornaments. I am currently learning how to make lace.

Carly Redrow

Originally born and raised in New Jersey, I have resided in Falls Church for four years. I spend my weekdays as the Facilities and Events Coordinator for an all-girls school in DC, a job that led me to the GSEMG program. My gardening enthusiasm first arose while planning the installation of a pollinator garden at work. After its completion, I realized just how much I wanted to continue learning about horticulture.



In addition to joining the High Tech and Tech Support teams, I'm excited to be able to start putting what I've learned to physical use in the Demonstration Gardens. While I've found I have a bit of a knack for propagation, I'm still trying to figure out how to keep those same plants alive after transplanting!

Cecilia Reynolds

No information available.

Joyce Skoglund

Growing up in southwestern Pennsylvania, I was exposed to gardening by my parents who always had a vegetable garden. At the time, I did not think about having a garden of my own when I left the area to come to Washington DC to work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. For many years before retirement, I worked with the Department of Defense as a civilian and then with private industry settling personal injury cases, whether they were medical malpractice, workers' compensation, or wrongful death.



My interest in gardening started when I joined my local garden club, became its president, and began taking “schools” under the umbrella of the National Garden Clubs, Inc. I enjoyed the Environmental School, Landscape Design School, and Gardening School. The Flower Show School and becoming a judge was not as interesting to me as gardening. Thus, it began!

I have a garden at my church in which I raise vegetables and donate all the produce – usually 900 - 1,000 pounds a summer – to Food for Others. Several of my friends are Extension Master Gardeners; they introduced me to the program, and here I am. I also have many gardens at my home. One that I enjoy a lot is my native plant garden. I started it to help with the monarch butterfly population.

I am looking forward to working on the Demonstration Gardens, Help Desk, Wellness Center, Wolf Trap, and Youth and Family Education teams – and many other projects.

Julie Small

My best garden memories as a child were created with my two grandmothers. I lived in Edina MN and visited my German Grandma Anna every weekend. Her stunning collection of roses graced the church altars on most Sundays. Our family summer vacations were in sunny San Jose CA, with my Irish Grandma Elizabeth. I remember the exotic flowers, with all their colors and scents, growing alongside the various fruit trees that treated us to daily tangy lemonades.



Living in Colorado, California, Minnesota, Kansas, Missouri, Germany, Virginia, Turkey, and Washington connected me with unique communities and landscapes. The outdoors has been a vital interest to me throughout my careers. This interest carried over into raising my family, traveling, and now establishing my life here in my home in Virginia. My career experiences spanned private, military, and public sector positions in the areas of finance, United States Air Force (Retired), three levels of government, and now retired life.

Exciting times are ahead for me! Attending the GSEMG program last Fall kicked off early springtime energies and learning adventures with new friends, my sage mentor, and community connections. I am looking forward to rolling up my sleeves to support the Garden Talks, Publicity, and Youth and Family Education teams, as well as FROGS.

Yvonne Tsikata

An international development economist by training, I retired in 2020 from the World Bank after 30 years. My geographic responsibilities over time spanned the globe (Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and Latin America) – 112 countries in all! I grew up in Ghana (Zone 12) and came to the US to study, first in Pennsylvania and then in New York, initially for college. My mother was an avid gardener, but my love of gardening only emerged after I was married and had my own family and home in Virginia in 1991. I've been inspired by the memory of my mother's gardens and the dozens of gardens that I've visited on my travels. I've learned by trial and error, and I'm enjoying having a sunny garden after years of having a mostly shade garden. While my first love is rose gardening, I've been expanding my knowledge of native plants and gardening for pollinators.



I heard about the GSEMG program through gardening friends, and I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to not only learn, but to share with others in the community. I am looking forward to working with the Garden Talks, High Tech, Virtual Plant Clinics, and Wolf Trap teams.

Julieta Varron

As an international development contracts compliance administrator for private organizations contracted by the US Agency for International Development, the Department of State, and the Department of Agriculture, I have lived and worked overseas for many years. My work assignments have taken me to Central America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. I now call Fairfax my home, living here for more than 15 years. I enjoy visiting gardens for inspiration while on travel.



Glenwhan Gardens in southwest Scotland is my current favorite. Other favorite places are the Monterey/Santa Cruz Arboretum and California national parks.

I grew up in Northern California and had family members who gardened, but my interest in gardening developed as an adult. I joined the Peace Corps, where I was responsible for environmental education. This involved working with rural schools and communities to plant and maintain vegetable gardens and to plant native trees. My international work experience taught me to appreciate the richness of every climate. Seeing the fields of coffee and the ginger and cacao plantations brought me much solace and allowed me to achieve a natural camaraderie with the local communities in which I found myself. More and more, I began to appreciate and internalize what I would call a “natural” way of existence.

I am an enthusiastic learner but currently consider myself a generalist. My love for the natural environment has sparked an interest in native plants, pollinators, soil structure, natural pest management, and compost fertilizer. With this knowledge, I hope to achieve the best results in my own garden with minimal harm to the environment. When I am outdoors, I am in my happy place. I’m excited to be on the Edible Garden, Wellness Circle, and Wolf Trap teams this year.

Nancy Vorona

My interest in gardening came later in life, as did my understanding of the many benefits of native plants. The timing was perfect last Fall for joining the GSEMG program, becoming a Master Gardener and all that entails, and spending more time in my own yard. I retired in summer 2021 after a career in international trade and technology-based economic development.



My roots are in Northern Virginia, but I had the good fortune to live and work on the West Coast and overseas before returning to Falls Church. Those years, however, did not include gardening. Being outdoors has always been restorative for me. I have discovered, among the great pleasures and rewards of working in the yard and garden, the important roles of turf and gardens to support the ecosystem.

Where I live, green space often is dominated by asphalt and concrete surfaces. I look forward to being part of the community that helps change that dynamic and to gardening at home. My internship activities include working with the Wolf Trap and the Youth and Family Education teams.

Nadine Wren

I am, for all intents and purposes, a native Virginian, having lived in and out of Northern Virginia since third grade. I work full time as a realtor in Virginia and Maryland. Previously, I worked in hospitality and property management.



I developed my love of gardening at the side of my favorite Pennsylvania grandmother, who maintained a huge garden and canned everything. I love any excuse to be outside, particularly if it involves picking berries, hauling compost or mulch, or playing in the soil. I consider myself a generalist; I love trees, perennials, edibles, annuals, potted plants, and propagation.

I have joined the Youth and Family Education team: as a lifetime Girl Scout, it checks all my boxes! I am also a member of the High Tech team because powerpoint and computer work are easy for me and can be done at any hour of the day – and am a member of the Photography team because I thoroughly enjoy taking pictures. For fun, I like old cars, trucks, houses, camping, boating, and Irish Setters.

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