



# Full bloom

Master gardeners help others get the most out of their vegetables, flowers and more

by DELIA O'HARA



## COSTCO CONNECTION

Costco warehouses and Costco.com carry a variety of items to help you create a beautiful and successful garden.

All across America this growing season, roughly 86,000 volunteer extension master gardeners will help more than 8.5 million amateur gardeners solve problems they encounter with the flowers and vegetables they tend.

### Digging in the dirt

In the beginning, master gardeners (MGs; [mastergardener.extension.org](http://mastergardener.extension.org)) helped suburbanites manage their lawns and ornamental plantings. Since then, community gardens and a surge in the culinary arts have sparked interest in herbs and vegetables; however, the pendulum swings back and forth. Jennifer Marquis, Washington State University (WSU) Extension's Master Gardener Program leader and a Costco member,

says Washington MGs are fielding more questions about how to grow food.

Natalie Bumgarner, an assistant professor of residential and consumer horticulture at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville; Tennessee's MG coordinator; and chairperson of the Extension Master Gardener National Committee, notes a backyard trend in Tennessee of growing small-fruit plants like blueberries and raspberries. MGs can help with houseplants, too.

Some programs offer youth camps and workshops, but only adults can qualify to volunteer. While most MGs are retirees, Marquis says she is seeing volunteers in their 20s, "and they're sticking with it."



Master gardener volunteers planting a demonstration garden.

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE

In the U.S., MGs start out with varying gardening experience but receive extensive training, for a fee, in best practices for residential gardening. They sit for certification exams and can access up-to-date horticultural information through their own state extensions.

### Germinating

“We say it’s not about knowing everything; it’s about knowing where you can find that information,” says Bumgarner.

Requirements vary from state to state, but Bumgarner says volunteers can expect to train at least 40 hours, spend about the same amount of time volunteering their first year and be required to meet annual volunteer and continuing-education minimums.

Volunteer opportunities nationwide include staffing hotlines and help desks; assisting with instructional gardens at schools; making presentations at fairs, shows, farmers markets and public gardens; and in general taking gardening know-how to the public. Extension master gardeners are not allowed to use their title commercially.

Bumgarner says she believes MGs get a lot of personal value from their activity, including the chance to become more proficient gardeners themselves. “They’re getting enjoyment and the opportunity to contribute. Our communities are getting great benefit, too,” she says. ■

Delia O’Hara is a writer based in Chicago, and an enthusiastic gardener.

### COMMON QUESTIONS

Here are some of the questions volunteer extension master gardeners commonly hear from the amateur gardening public:

- What is this plant?
- What’s wrong with my plant/tree?
- What is this bug that seems to be damaging my plant?
- How can I get rid of this garden pest?
- Can I garden effectively without pesticides?
- What plants do best in our climate?
- What plants will do best in my sunny/shady yard?
- What plants are most resistant to pests?
- How can I produce my own food?
- How do I start a community or youth garden?—*DO*

### Planting seeds

The master gardeners program was founded in 1973 by David Gibby, a Seattle-area agricultural extension agent and Costco member, along with others at WSU, one of the nation’s land-grant institutions that foster practical education through outreach “extensions.” WSU’s extension master gardener model has spread to most states and been adapted for Canada.

### Helpful links

For more information visit these sites.

**Find a master gardener program:**  
[mastergardener.org](http://mastergardener.org)

[extension.org/about-us/find-a-program](http://extension.org/about-us/find-a-program).

**Extension MG National Committee:**  
[sites.google.com/a/extension.org/emg\\_coordinators/extension-](http://sites.google.com/a/extension.org/emg_coordinators/extension)

[master-gardener-national-committee.org](http://master-gardener-national-committee.org).

**Washington State University program:**  
[wsu.edu/program/mastergardener](http://wsu.edu/program/mastergardener)  
[wsu.edu/program/overview](http://wsu.edu/program/overview).—*DO*