How to Become a Master Gardener

The Penn State Master Gardener Program is administered at the county level where recruitment, training, and volunteer service occur. Master Gardener trainees are required to participate in a minimum of forty hours of basic training, score 80% on the final exam, and fulfill 50 hours of volunteer service. Qualifications, requirements, and steps to become a certified Penn State Master Gardener are included in the Policy Statement below.

I. Program Mission

The Penn State Extension Master Gardener volunteer program supports the outreach mission of Penn State Cooperative Extension by utilizing unbiased research-based information to educate the public on best practices in sustainable horticulture and environmental stewardship.

II. Program Overview

Penn State Extension Master Gardeners are volunteers who support Penn State Cooperative Extension's educational programs in consumer horticulture. They develop their horticultural expertise through participation in educational programs conducted by Penn State University faculty and Cooperative Extension staff. Faculty, Extension specialists, and Extension educators also provide diagnostic support for horticultural issues and questions to Master Gardener volunteers actively participating in the program. Extension publications, teaching materials, and other program support materials are provided as deemed appropriate by the Extension specialist and county Master Gardener Coordinator. Information presented by Master Gardeners must be consistent with Penn State Cooperative Extension recommendations concerning various aspects of consumer horticulture.

III. Qualifications

- Strong interest and knowledge in horticulture as evidenced by scoring a minimum of 80% on a final exam administered by Penn State Cooperative Extension.
- Willingness and availability to undertake extensive training in horticulture.
- Dedication and willingness to perform the required hours of volunteer service for Penn State Cooperative Extension.
- Ability to communicate in an effective, diplomatic, and professional manner with others by telephone, personal contact, group contact, email, and in writing.
- Willingness to support Penn State Cooperative Extension staff in providing Extension audiences with unbiased, research-based consumer horticulture information.

IV. Standards of Behavior for Master Gardener Volunteers

- Respect and adhere to the policies and guidelines of the Penn State Cooperative Extension Master Gardener program at both state and county levels.
- Promote and support Penn State Cooperative Extension in developing effective county, state, and national programs.
- Work cooperatively with Penn State Cooperative Extension staff and volunteers.
- Act in a professional, positive, respectful, and ethical manner.
- Encourage participation of and respect for individuals of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives.
- Participate in required training programs.
- Perform the required number of volunteer hours for Penn State Cooperative Extension.
- Accept volunteer assignments and changes made by supervising Master Gardener Coordinator.
- Maintain an activity log and continuing education log and record it into the online Volunteer Management System (VMS) on a monthly, quarterly, or yearly basis as required by county operating procedures. Complete required records, evaluations, or reports in a timely manner.
- Attend meetings as deemed necessary by supervising Master Gardener Coordinator to obtain information about continuing education opportunities, learn about horticultural issues, and assist in coordinating Master Gardener activities.
- Be accountable to supervising Master Gardener Coordinator by notifying of planned volunteer activities and by obtaining pre-approval for volunteer activities.
V. Basic Training

County Master Gardener programs offer a minimum of forty (40) hours of basic training. Each trainee is expected to attend all core classes with any missed sessions to be made up at the discretion of supervising Master Gardener Coordinator. Attendance at classes offered in addition to the 40 required hours is determined at the county level; supervising Master Gardener Coordinator may substitute locally relevant topics for any additional classes.

Core Classes

Topics required in all counties: 40 hours

- Ch 1. Teaching and Communication
- Ch 2. Basic Botany
- Ch 3. Plant Propagation
- Ch 4. Soil Health and Fertilizer Management
- Ch 5. Composting
- Ch 6. Controlling Pests Safely
- Ch 7. Basics of Entomology
- Ch 8. Plant Diseases
- Ch 9. Indoor Plants
- Ch 10. The Vegetable Garden
- Ch 11. Lawn Care
- Ch 12. Pruning Ornamental Plants
- Ch 16. Woody Ornamentals
- Ch 17. Herbaceous Plants
- Ch 18. Native Plants
- Ch 19. Weeds
- Ch 20. Invasive Species

Additional Classes

Topics may vary by county. Optional.

- Ch 9. Indoor Plants
- Ch 13. Tree Fruit
- Ch 14. Small Fruit
- Ch 15. Landscape Design
- Ch 21. Garden Wildlife
- Ch 22. Gardening Equipment

Sustainable gardening concepts and practices are included as an integrated component throughout basic training. Weekly or occasional quizzes may be administered at the discretion of supervising Master Gardener Coordinator.

VI. Initial Certification

To obtain certification as a Penn State Extension Master Gardener, each trainee must complete the following requirements within a period of one (1) year from successful completion of basic training:

- Pass the final examination administered on-site with a minimum score of 80%. The exam will be a closed book exam.
- Complete any county-required activity (e.g., post-training presentations, office orientation, additional training workshops, etc).
- Fulfill the 50-hour volunteer service commitment and record volunteer hours online using the Volunteer Management System (VMS).
- Trainees may begin to volunteer as soon as training classes begin with supervision from a certified Master Gardener.

Upon successful completion, the trainee is awarded a Penn State Extension Master Gardener certificate. Master Gardener certification is restrictive in that it is valid only while the individual is participating in the Penn State Extension Master Gardener program. Certification in subsequent years is issued only to an individual who makes a commitment for participation in the program for the coming year as outlined below. When an individual ceases active participation in the program, his or her designation as a Penn State Extension Master Gardener becomes void. An individual not continuing in the program should be aware that continued representation as a Penn State Extension Master Gardener is a violation of the original commitment made to Penn State Cooperative Extension.

VII. Certification in Subsequent Years

To maintain certification for participation in the program in subsequent years, a Penn State Extension Master Gardener must recertify annually by following these guidelines:

- Commit to a minimum of twenty (20) hours of volunteer service to be completed each year; see Volunteer Activities and Guidelines for Volunteer Participation (Sections X and XI) below.
- Complete ten (10) hours of approved continuing education (CE) each year; see Guidelines below. At least five (5) of the ten (10) required continuing education hours must be Extension affiliated programming.
- Hours beyond the minimum requirement for annual volunteer service and annual continuing education may not be carried over to the following year.
- Exceptions to the requirements for annual recertification may be granted for hardship or extenuating circumstances at the discretion of supervising Master Gardener Coordinator.
VIII. Guidelines for Continuing Education (CE)

- The continuing education training must be pre-approved as acceptable by supervising Master Gardener Coordinator.
- At least five (5) of the ten (10) hours must be Extension-affiliated programming.
- Examples of continuing education are: basic Master Gardener training; advanced Master Gardener training; state, regional, and international Master Gardener conferences; approved university and/or community college courses; arboretum and/or botanical garden seminars and conferences; webinars; approved Extension-sponsored seminars and conferences; and Pennsylvania Federation of Garden Club courses.
- Only actual instructional hours may be counted toward the annual continuing education requirement. Travel, lunch, or break times are not included in counting continuing education hours.

IX. Guidelines for Volunteer Participation

General Guidelines

- Attendance at meetings is strongly encouraged and counts as volunteer service time.
- Volunteer service for outside organizations which satisfies the requirements for participation or membership in those organizations may not be counted as Penn State Extension Master Gardener volunteer activity, unless you are there to represent Penn State Extension Master Gardeners.
- Master Gardener participation in non-Extension sponsored programs/activities/events without prior approval of supervising Master Gardener Coordinator may not count as volunteer service time, at the discretion of supervising Master Gardener Coordinator.
- Travel time to and from approved Master Gardener volunteer activities counts toward volunteer service hours.
- Volunteers should wear the official Penn State Extension Master Gardener Name Badge while volunteering for Penn State Cooperative Extension.

Use of Title

The title “Penn State Extension Master Gardener” is to be used only and exclusively by an individual trained and certified to assist Penn State Cooperative Extension. The title is valid only when the volunteer is participating in the Penn State Extension Master Gardener program. The title “Penn State Extension Master Gardener” is to be used only when doing unpaid volunteer service in a program activity approved by supervising Master Gardener Coordinator.

Endorsements

A Penn State Extension Master Gardener must not advertise his name or his place of business or be listed on the advertisements of business places as a Penn State Extension Master Gardener. Because the Master Gardener program is a Penn State Cooperative Extension public service program providing unbiased, research-based information, appearing as a commercial activity, having association with commercial products, or implying Penn State Cooperative Extension endorsement of any product or place of business is improper and not allowed.

The training and experience gained by participating in the Penn State Extension Master Gardener program are valuable and may rightfully be listed as qualifications when seeking employment. Once employed and while serving as a paid employee, or if self-employed, a Master Gardener must not display credentials or give the appearance of being a Master Gardener at the place of business or in any literature, brochures, advertising, or marketing materials associated with that business, unless the business is specifically designated by supervising Master Gardener Coordinator as an approved location for a Master Gardener activity.

Educational Recommendations

When making recommendations, which include the use of fertilizers and pesticides, a Penn State Extension Master Gardener must follow current Cooperative Extension recommendations. Horticultural problems which are not specifically covered by Extension recommendations should be referred to an Extension educator or Extension specialist. Questions concerning commercial production of crops and pest control on such crops must be referred to an Extension educator or Extension specialist.

Written materials (news releases, newsletters, fact sheets, etc.) prepared by a Penn State Extension Master Gardener must be reviewed and approved by supervising Extension staff prior to release or publication.

X. MG Acceptable/Non-Acceptable Volunteer Activities

There must be an educational purpose and/or teaching component to all approved activities. Examples of ACCEPTABLE Penn State Extension Master Gardener activities are:

- Answer consumer/home gardener’s telephone and email inquiries and assist Extension office visitors with plant and insect samples for identification or diagnosis, and give general pesticide recommendations (Garden Hotline).
- Assist with Extension educational programming, such as Poison Prevention programs, talks for local organizations, Extension-sponsored workshops, exhibits, displays, etc.
- Write research-based gardening and horticultural information for fact sheets, newsletters, newspapers, magazines, websites, blogs, etc.
• Design or assist with establishing and maintaining *educational* demonstration gardens, such as community, healing, school, pollinator, and Extension office gardens.
• Develop or assist with community-based environmental stewardship projects.
• Assist teachers, 4-H volunteers and youth, and/or children with gardening education projects.
• Conduct/teach horticultural related clinics, pruning, or other demonstrations, at Extension offices, local libraries, farmers markets, government centers, fairs, expos, garden clubs, civic groups, community events, flower shows, etc.
• Serve as neighborhood "plant expert" in own community by answering home gardening questions, diagnosing plant problems, and/or instructing neighbors on proper care of lawn, landscape, garden, or houseplants.
• Teach Master Gardener training sessions.
• Demonstrate safe use of pesticide sprayers and power garden equipment, including tractors, tillers, mowers, shredders, and/or chippers.
• Operate tractors, tillers, mowers, shredders, or chippers; use other equipment such as hand pruners, loppers, hand saws, shovels, hoes, trowels, and sharp knives while doing MG activity.
• Serve on municipal street tree/shade tree committee.
• Create or prepare visuals/graphics, such as posters, flyers, program announcements, table top displays for horticultural programs and/or publications.
• Host, produce, or appear as guest on radio/TV and/or use station’s radio/TV equipment.
• Photograph Extension/MG events.
• Solicit donations and/or sponsorships to benefit the Master Gardener program.
• Haul materials such as wood, pallets, and plants in his/her own vehicle for Extension projects.
• Assist with community composting projects such as building compost bins for use in educational demonstrations.
• Build bird/bat boxes, raised beds/gardens, or teach others how to build each.
• Provide assistance to horticultural therapy programs for emotionally/physically/mentally disabled persons, nursing homes, hospitals, state/county prisons, youth detention centers.
• Teach 4-H school enrichment for plant science only, teach plant science at 4-H camp, serve as a 4-H leader for plant science only, serve as 4-H judging team coach for plant science only, provide programs related to horticulture for 4-H leaders.
• Chaperone 4-H field trips for plant science only.
• Judge horticultural projects for 4-H, school or fair projects, community fairs, flower shows, etc.
• Organize plant swaps.

• Organize and/or lead educational bus trips/tours and garden tours related to horticulture.
• Open his/her garden to the public for educational tours/demonstration.
• Assist with planting and maintaining variety trails at experimental farms.
• Assist with data collection, testing, and evaluating new varieties of vegetable, turf, ornamentals, and/or flowers for research projects.
• Assist with or organize horticultural files in Extension office.
• Coordinate Master Gardener activities in the county.
• Serve on Extension Board.
• Serve on Extension Advisory committees.
• Serve as liaison between the Extension office and municipal officials.
• Serve on state/regional/national Master Gardener committee(s).
• May hold fundraisers approved by supervising Extension staff.
• Conduct other activities as determined by local needs and the prior approval of supervising Extension staff.

The following activities are **NOT ACCEPTABLE** for Master Gardener volunteer service:

• Perform pesticide application, including using Round-up or Preen on gardens used by the public.
• Develop and deliver training for garden center employees, ground manager, and nursery personnel, unless approved by Extension.
• Teach pruning to municipal tree trimmer (arborist).
• Design gardens/landscapes for schools or communities that are *non-educational*.
• Maintenance of garden for schools, civic groups, communities.
• Maintenance of public gardens/arboreta, municipal parks, state/national parks
• Organize community garden club.
• Establish and manage a farmers market.
• Grow or harvest crops for distribution to food bank/soup kitchen (except food from educational project).
• Glean fields/orchards for distribution to food bank.
• Clean up litter along the highway, at parks, or playgrounds.
• Recycling of cans and bottles, newspapers, plastic nursery pots.
• Serve as a 4-H leader, judge, and chaperone for activities not related to horticulture.
• Serve on Friends of 4-H, 4-H Curriculum Development committee.
• Operate chain saws while performing Master Gardener activity.
• Teach or make recommendations about the use of medicinal herbs.

All activities should be approved by the county Master Gardener Coordinator.

XI. Master Gardener Status

Titles Used in the Penn State Extension Master Gardener program

• Master Gardener Trainee - through completion of basic training.
• Master Gardener Apprentice - from completion of basic training through completion of initial volunteer service.
• Certified Master Gardener - active in the program and maintaining certification each year.
• Inactive Master Gardener - see guidelines below.
• Master Gardener Emeritus - Status is to be bestowed to a Master Gardener who has served with distinction and retired with 1500 hours and 10 or more years of exemplary service; title with certificate awarded after nomination or recommendation and acceptance by supervising Master Gardener Coordinator. Emeritus members are exempt from the annual service, education, and attendance requirements. They are entitled to attend monthly meetings, scheduled events, and tours. They may not vote, serve on committees, or hold elected offices. An Emeritus member cannot be returned to active status. Emeritus status may be bestowed posthumously.
• Honorary Master Gardener or Master Gardener Friend - may be granted to an individual who is not a Master Gardener for outstanding service to the program.

Inactive Status Guidelines

• Inactive status may be requested by a Master Gardener who is unable to commit to an additional twenty (20) hours volunteer service plus ten (10) hours of continuing education at present, but would like the opportunity to recertify in the future.
• The request must be made in writing on the Inactive Status Request Form to the county Master Gardener Coordinator or supervising Extension staff.
• Approval is at the discretion of the Master Gardener Coordinator.
• A Master Gardener requesting inactive status must be in good standing, having completed the original commitment of training, exam, and volunteer service and having maintained certification in subsequent years up to the time of requesting inactive status.
• An inactive Master Gardener must attend ten (10) hours of acceptable continuing education for each year of inactive status. (See Section VIII for examples of continuing education. CE.)
• An inactive Master Gardener may recertify within three (3) years as long as the above criteria are met.
• An individual on inactive status for more than three (3) years is required to retake the basic Master Gardener training. A fee for tuition may be assessed to cover the basic training costs.

Out-of-State Transfers

A Master Gardener who is certified and in good standing in another state may be admitted to a Penn State Extension Master Gardener program at the discretion of supervising Master Gardener Coordinator and by meeting the following criteria:

• Acquire or be provided with a current Penn State Extension Master Gardener training manual. A fee for program materials may be assessed.
• Acquire or be provided with a Penn State Extension Master Gardener name badge. A fee for materials may be assessed.
• Score a minimum of 80% on an open book final exam administered by Penn State Cooperative Extension.
• Meet the requirements for annual certification listed in Section VII.

County Transfers

A certified Penn State Extension Master Gardener in good standing in one county may transfer to another county within Pennsylvania at the discretion of supervising Master Gardener Coordinator in both counties. Written notice by the Master Gardener Coordinator must be provided stating the Master Gardener that requests the transfer is certified and in good standing.

XII. Financial and Liability Information

Fees

To cover the cost of the training manual and supplies, a non-refundable fee determined by the county program is charged. Training may be via Adobe Connect or face-to-face as determined by each county program. The fee for the Adobe Connect state-wide training will be determined by the State Coordinator. The fee for face-to-face county specific training will be determined by the county program. Individual counties may charge additional fees to cover meeting room rental, travel expenses for instructors, or other costs. These additional fees are itemized and kept to a minimum. Upon an individual’s acceptance into the Master Gardener program, this fee is paid to the local county Extension office or to the Master Gardener program as per county policy.

Cooperative Extension programs are open to all regardless of their ability to pay. Provisions must be made to reduce or
waive fees when an individual is unable to pay.

**Liability Insurance**

Penn State Extension Master Gardener volunteers are insured under the P.W. Wood & Son, Inc. general liability insurance policy. Coverage applies only to individual volunteers while performing volunteer activities for Penn State Cooperative Extension. The coverage does not extend to other organizations or groups with which a Master Gardener volunteer is working. A volunteer must not sign contracts or leases assuming liability responsibility on behalf of other organizations or groups. All contracts or "Facilities Use" agreements that require volunteer signature must be reviewed by the Woods office prior to signing. Contract submission must follow approved protocols and appropriate paperwork as identified by Penn State Cooperative Extension policy.

Each year, county Extension offices are asked to identify the number of volunteers to be covered and the appropriate premium charge is applied. P.W. Wood does not request volunteer names, as they understand volunteers are not static and move off and on active status throughout the policy year.

**Speaking Engagements**

When a Penn State Extension Master Gardener speaks before a group on a horticultural topic, it is permissible for him or her to accept reimbursement for expenses and/or gift donations to the county Master Gardener fund. However, a Master Gardener is not allowed to seek personal paid speaking engagements while participating in an approved Extension function and while using the Penn State Extension Master Gardener title.

In all cases, the county Extension office policy on speaking engagement fees must be honored, provided it complies with the guidelines described above. When a Master Gardener travels outside of his or her home base county for a speaking engagement, it is allowable to request reimbursement for travel expenses from the county Extension office requesting the Master Gardener's services.

All reimbursements and gifts must be deposited directly into the Master Gardener's home base county Penn State Cooperative Extension (PSCE) Program account. Checks must be made payable to "PSCE ____________ County," "PSCE Program Fund," or other appropriate PSCE account. Checks must be turned over to the office bookkeeper in a timely fashion for deposit into the county Extension office program account.

**Clearance for Work with Youth and Other At-Risk Populations**

A Penn State Extension Master Gardener must provide a safe environment by not harming youth or adults in any way, whether through discrimination, sexual harassment, physical force, verbal or mental abuse, neglect, or other harmful action. A Penn State Extension Master Gardener must commit no illegal or abusive act. At-risk populations include senior and disabled individuals.

- Only Master Gardeners working with youth in a Penn State Extension sponsored program are required to obtain background clearances and participate in mandated reporter training. In this situation, where the Master Gardener is working directly with children in small groups, a background check is required.
- When Master Gardeners are sponsoring and presenting youth programs, two or more "authorized" adults with background clearances and mandated reporter training must be in attendance.
- Master Gardeners who are called upon as a presenter for a youth program which is sponsored by a school, scout group, church program, etc., no background clearances or mandated reporter training is required.
- When youth attend a Master Gardener program in the company of an adult, that adult is responsible for the children. No background clearances or mandated reporter training is required.
- No background clearances or mandated reporter training is required for the Poison Prevention Program.
- Master Gardeners who are not working with or plan to work with youth, do not need to have background clearances or mandated reporter training.
- A Master Gardener desiring to work in conjunction with 4-H programming will fall under 4-H guidelines for volunteer screening.
- The cost of volunteer background clearances will be covered by county Master Gardener program funds or individual Master Gardeners.

**Application**

Before completing the Master Gardener application, contact the county Extension office in your area for an updated schedule of classes. Basic training for Master Gardeners is not offered annually in every county. Send the completed application to the county where you reside.

Master Gardener Application Form

(PDF)

extension.psu.edu

Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research and extension programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
Where trade names appear, no discrimination is intended, and no endorsement by Penn State Extension is implied.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability or protected veteran status.

© The Pennsylvania State University 2019