A Brief History of the Kansas Master Gardener Program

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Traditional Extension Operations: Since the beginning of Extension at K-State in 1905 and formalized with Land Grant Universities in 1914, local extension offices focused on agriculture, home economics, and 4-H with programming and staffing. By the 1960’s there was a general recognition that Extension needed to relate to a larger portion of the population for it to continue to serve citizens. Horticulture was a good way to relate to homeowners in cities and towns so local Extension boards began to add county extension horticultural agents to their staff in urban counties. These same additions were occurring throughout the country. In the decade of the 1960s there were 6 Kansas horticultural agents added with more to follow in decades to follow. These agents began to offer meetings and classes on a wide range of horticultural topics, answer phone calls and questions on horticultural problems, and make ‘house calls’ to diagnose plant problems.

The ‘Perfect Storm’: In the early 70s people were gradually increasing their contact with the local horticultural agents so their days became busier. Then, there were 3 situations that resulted in a huge change in the way that horticultural agents were able to work. These 3 situations were somewhat related but had unique individual consequences. An embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), usually referred to as the ‘Arab Oil Embargo’ in 1973 reduced petroleum exports to the US. This caused shortages of gasoline and long lines at service stations. It also caused a ‘seismic shift’ in US citizens attitude about automobile travel. Businesses along interstate highways closed as people chose to stay at home rather than travel. The result was that people began to focus on their homes. Interest in landscaping, planting of trees and shrubs, flower beds, and other things to beautify their property increased dramatically. At the same time, the early 70’s was the beginning of the ‘Earth Movement’ when people became more aware of environmental issues and recycling, composting, and reduced use of pesticides dramatically increased prior to the first Earth Day in 1974. Still another situation developed when people began to realize that much of the food distribution system depended on truck transportation across the US and gas shortages resulted in a ‘food scare’. This led to a dramatic increase in people wanting to ‘grow their own’ food as well as start local and farmers markets. The combined result of these 3 situations resulted in people wanting and needing horticultural information like it had never existed before and that need was all focused on the research-based, unbiased information available from the Land Grant University at the local extension office.

The Rush for Information: Suddenly, local extension offices were besieged for information. In these days before the internet was developed, information was available in printed form (fact sheets and bulletins) and information was flying off the shelves. Horticultural agents were in demand to give talks and offer classes but the main way that people wanted to get information was to make a telephone call to the horticultural office and ask for help or describe a problem. If the agent tried to put some information in the local newspaper or appear on radio or television, it only seemed to make people more aware of their presence and more calls came. Agents had little time to plan or think about getting ready for the next event when the phone was literally ringing off the wall. Throughout the US, horticultural agents were struggling to figure out ways of handle calls and questions without adding large numbers of professional staff. Being able to make ‘house calls’ ceased and agents struggled to put in full days at the office answering questions and doing evening and weekend classes and presentations.

The Initial Idea: In the early 70s two horticultural agents in adjoining King and Pierce counties in Washington (Seattle/Tacoma) were dealing with hundreds of calls a week. But, they noticed that many of the questions were predictable and repeated. They speculated that some enthusiastic, amateur
horticulturists could respond to most of the common questions that people had if they were given a ‘refresher’ course to build their confidence. Dr. David Gibby and William Sheer proposed that by offering volunteers a unique, special horticultural class with a requirement that they volunteer time to share their gained knowledge may be a way of inexpensively distributing information to a much wider audience. They both had spent time in Germany and recalled the way that Germans bestowed titles for hard-earned proficiency levels gained in various crafts. So, they thought that volunteers that completed some rigorous training should be bestowed with the title-Gartenmeister or “Master Gardener”. They proposed their idea to specialists and administrators but found no one was very enthusiastic about its success. However, administrators didn’t close the door entirely but suggested testing their idea by surveying clients visiting an information booth at a local shopping mall. With the publicity provided by a local newspaper garden writer and a regional editor for Sunset magazine, both of whom wrote articles describing the new proposed process, people turned up at the mall enthused by the idea. They received over 600 names of individuals that would be interested in participating in the program. So, in 1972 they began to set up a process of how the whole thing might work. Working with Dr. Bernie Wesenberg at the Western Washington Research and Extension center they began to develop a curriculum and identified specialists to assist in training. They also began to develop ways the volunteers could help—answering the phone on selected days, assisting with local gardening educational events, and maintaining demonstration sites. By 1973 they were ready to offer their first class. The program was then expanded to eastern Washington (Spokane) in the following year. At the end of 1973, Dr. Gibby left WSU to accept a commercial position and Wm Speer began to focus on commercial horticultural programs (while continuing to teach MG classes) so there were changes in local and specialist staff as the program evolved. Dr. Wesenberg became the main ‘spokesman’ as other states began to express interest in duplicating what Washington had started.

**Master Gardening in Kansas:** In the spring of 1978, Dr. Bob Wearne, national extension horticulturist, convened a meeting of state extension horticulturist and county horticulture agents to discuss ways of reaching urban audiences with horticultural programming. There were 2 meetings held in San Francisco and Washington DC and 3-5 participants from various states were encouraged to attend. Participants from Kansas went to DC and heard a wide range of ideas that various states were trying. The concept was that participants were to share what they learned with colleagues back home and implement those things that they thought would ‘fit’ their situations. Dr. Wesenberg was there to share what Washington had done with the MG program and, at that time, only 2-3 other states had more than 1-year experience with the program although several states had started the program the previous year. On the return flight, Larry Stouse, horticultural agent from Johnson County, indicated that he really liked the idea of the Master Gardener program and thought that it would work well in Johnson County. At a gathering of horticultural agents and specialist in early summer, the horticultural department head at that time was cautious about implementing the program (as had been true with the administrators in Washington earlier). However, Larry Stouse continued to be enthusiastic about starting the program and elicited help from Dr. Chuck Marr and Dr. Richard Wootton of the

![Larry Stouse, Johnson Co Hort Agent](image)
state specialist staff to assist in planning the program implementation and curriculum. (Dr. Wootton left his position at K-State in 1981 for an administrative position at the University of Maryland) At the DC conference, we were warned not to ‘move too fast’ but to make sure that specific projects that volunteers could help with were identified, the commitment to conducting the training classes was firmly established, volunteers were widely recruited and their applications screened, and that local administrative boards were well aware of what would be happening with the program. After over a year of planning and organization, the program was ready to be implemented.

**Off and Running:** By late 1980, recruitment for volunteers was started for classes to begin in January of 1981 at the Johnson County extension office. Starting on Jan 23, classes were 6 hours long and the entire class was completed in 6-weeks. The curriculum was set to include 12 units of a variety of horticultural topics including:

1. Plant Growth and Development
2. Soils, Water and Fertilizer
3. Fruit
4. Vegetables
5. Tree and Shrub Plant Materials
6. Landscape Maintenance
7. Landscape Design
8. Perennial and Annual Flowers
9. Insects
10. Diseases
11. Indoor Plants
12. Lawn Maintenance

Each participant was given a large 3-inch ring binder notebook with manila subject matter dividers. Each notebook had a clear plastic sleeve on the front to insert a title page-Master Gardener Notebook. It was determined that we would use copies of various bulletins and fact sheets from K-State Extension as the printed materials to support each class. Drs Marr and Wootton wrote some chapters on Plant Growth and Soils, Water and Fertilizer since no printed materials were available on these topics. The fact sheets were to be distributed before each class and students were to punch their copies with a 3-hole punch and insert it in their notebook before each class. It was interesting to watch student reaction at the first class to receive a large notebook with only some manila dividers with a few pages of printed material included in 2 sections. However, by the end of the class, the notebooks were jammed full of printed materials accumulated as the class progressed. The first class of volunteers completed their training and enthusiastically started volunteering- assisting with a Hot Line phone call answering, assisting with an educational display at the Kansas City Garden Show, and conducting diagnostic activities at various public events in the area. In 1982 the program was started in Sedgwick County but volunteers did not get started so enthusiastically. At that time, Sedgwick County had a 2-office locations and agents were split between the 2 locations. After a few years, the offices
were consolidated in 1 location. The program was re-established in 1987 and rapidly became a roaring success.

The Program Expands: Several horticultural agents visited the Johnson County program training and began steps to establish the program in their counties. Phil Sell from Shawnee Co and Earl VanMeter from Douglas Co both implemented steps to start the program in Topeka and Lawrence. When the Sedgwick Co program was re-established several agents in the Southcentral region met to establish a regional training including Bob Neier (Reno Co), Dennis Patton (McPherson Co), and Chip Miller (Saline Co). Jim Lindquist, county extension director in Riley, started the program in Manhattan. Jack Smith started the program in Leavenworth Co as well as Bruce Chladny in Wyandotte Co.

Growing Pains: As the program grew, there began to be some competition for dates that specialists could schedule for training. Training for the eastern Kansas counties gradually shifted to the fall months and training for the western counties was done in the spring. There was also some coordination established as we tried to schedule training in Johnson on the same day as training in Wyandotte/Leavenworth with specialist traveling over the noon hour to each location. A similar type of rotation was established with Topeka and Lawrence as well as Wichita and Butler/Butler/Harvey/Reno.

The State Master Gardener Convention: In 1989 Sedgwick County MGs sent an invitation to other county programs to come to Wichita for a convention. The convention was held in April and there would be educational classes, local tours, and chances to meet volunteers from various areas of the state. They also proposed formation of a Kansas Master Gardener Association to provide leadership for developing MG programs throughout the state and to keep the annual convention going. In following years, conventions were held in Topeka, Lawrence, and Manhattan. The timing often interfered with local MG tours or events-preventing some MGs from participating. There soon developed some ‘hard feelings’ if a delegation
didn’t show up from various areas of the state. Also, it became a lot of work to plan and execute the convention and volunteers questioned the time in addition to their educational volunteer hours. Also, some counties had a small number of volunteers and not able to host a convention so they felt a little left out of the process. The final MG state convention was held in Wichita in 1994. This was followed by an offering of a statewide Advanced Master Gardener training.

**Advanced Master Gardener Training:** In the last section of this history, it mentions that the original concept of the Master Gardener program was that MGs would receive their training, complete their volunteer hours, and that would be the end. They would be recognized for their accomplishment and other MGs would be trained and continue the process. However, MGs in every state that implemented the program wanted to continue to receive training and continue to volunteer in future years. In the first Kansas class of Master Gardeners in Johnson County it became clear that MGs didn’t want to quit. In fact, they demanded that they be allowed to continue volunteering and began to inquire about ways that the training could be continued. It became clear that having trained volunteers wanting to keep going was a valuable asset. They not only could continue to volunteer but they could serve as mentors and advisors for new MGs being trained. This created something of a dilemma as the Kansas program expanded. It meant that counties now had to plan for training of new MGs but also plan for advanced training. It also meant that state faculty were being asked to not only be involved in MG training throughout the state but also were being asked to go back for advanced training too. We had to work through how much additional training could be provided and what types of educational offerings might constitute advanced training. Various types of training including classes and tours were considered and educational offerings were often led by non-KSU personnel.

When the last statewide MG convention was held, it was recognized that MGs wanted to continue to get together from various counties if some system could have developed where MGs were not so involved with the planning and implementation of the gathering. With encouragement from Norman Warminski, Sedgwick County horticultural agent, Dr. Chuck Marr consulted with the Manhattan-based state extension staff and they agreed to shift the ‘convention’ to an ‘advanced training’ event to be held on the campus in Manhattan. It was proposed to hold the event in late Sept to early October (when no home football game was scheduled in Manhattan). This seemed to be an
ideal time for MGs to participate. MGs were also excited about traveling to the K-State campus. The first statewide advanced training was held on Sept 15-16, 1995. Throckmorton Hall was utilized for classes held on a Friday morning and afternoon as well as Saturday morning. The first year, MGs from various counties provided snacks for coffee breaks, K-State faculty provided beverages, and box lunches were used for meals. After 2 years, we began working with the Division of Continuing Education to make arrangement for catered breaks and meals. As the participation grew, several other campus buildings were used in addition to using the K-State Union for general assembly sessions and lunch/evening meal. Statewide Advanced training continues in Sept-October of each year with about 300 Kansas Master Gardeners from around the state participating.

A State Master Gardener Coordinator: In 1993, Dr. Richard Wootton returned to K-State as the Director of Extension. From his experiences at Univ. of Maryland and Univ. of Florida after leaving K-State, he recognized the value of the Master Gardener program in linking our educational programs in urban areas of Kansas. He also recognized how the K-State program had grown and diversified and it was now requiring some substantial statewide coordination. For several years, K-State had provided funding for a student intern to be available during the summer months to be ‘by the phone’ to answer phone calls from county agents throughout the state when specialists were traveling or on vacation. Dr Wootton was instrumental in providing funding for a full-time position to serve as Master Gardener coordinator as well as staffing a ‘horticulture response center’ on the K-State campus. In 1996 Ward Upham was hired in that position. He was to be involved and overseen planning of the advanced training, coordinating MG programs throughout the state, and provided training. Through his leadership, the MG program has grown to a variety of locations in northwest and southwest Kansas as well as southeast Kansas.

The Adventures of the Master Gardener Notebook: From its beginnings as a 3-ring binder with MGs punching and adding fact sheets to the notebook as classes progressed, there were several problems that began to develop that required a change in how the notebook was handled. Valuable class time was lost as class participants punched and assembled their notebook materials at the start of each class. As budgets became tighter, many fact sheets were discontinued and as specialists positions were not refilled factsheets were not kept up to date. Some class instructors were showing up with pages of information that they wanted included in the notebook in printed form. Since different instructors were
used for some classes in various locations, there began to develop discrepancy in the printed information available to MGs depending on their location. It was determined that there was a need for a printed MG notebook to serve as a standard reference that would be printed in advance. This process was started in 1997. Counties would provide an estimated number of copies needed and would pay for the notebook duplication cost from MG participant fees. Specialist and agents were involved in writing and reviewing the subject matter material included in each chapter. That material is periodically reviewed for relevance and changes made as needed.

**Master Gardener Nametags and Certificates:** The first class of Master Gardeners in Johnson County received a certificate and a nametag at the completion of their training. However, there were some MGs that completed the training that never got around to completing their volunteer hour commitment. There was a great deal of pride associated in receiving their certificate and nametag so it was determined to provide a ‘certificate of completion of training’ at the last class of the session and to schedule a ‘graduation ceremony’ (usually with a potluck dinner) later in the year after MGs had a chance to complete their volunteer hours. For a number of years, an engraver in Johnson county provide nametags for MGs in other counties but after several years a common nametag for all programs was discontinued. A certificate for a Master Gardener was designed by K-State graphic designers and provided free to counties where participant names can be lettered or computer generated for presentation to new MG graduates. The printing of the notebook and creation of a common completion certificate necessitated the design of a common Kansas Master Gardener logo which is now adopted and ‘certified’ for use by K-State Communications Dept. It can be downloaded from the Logos section of the K-State Research & Extension web site.

**Master Gardeners Today:** There are presently Master Gardener programs in 50 Kansas counties. Some of these counties are organized into multi-county extension districts.

**Similarities and Differences:** The Master Gardener program has grown to participation by nearly every state with almost 97000 volunteers participating. It is remarkable that with all the duplication over many years in many counties and states there are several things that have remained nearly identical to the first program in Tacoma/Seattle established 40 years ago.

1. The original training was 8 hours a day for 5 weeks or 40 hours of training with a volunteer commitment of 40 hours that following year. This is fairly consistent with most programs today.
2. The original volunteer projects of ‘phone response lines’, assisting with educational events, demonstration gardens, diagnostic clinics, and ‘speakers bureau’ is how the majority of MG programs utilize volunteers although some very unique and creative projects have been established in many states and regions. These were the same initial projects that were identified with the first MG program in Washington.
3. The program has remained closely connected to the Extension program of the Land Grant University and has remained committed to its educational focus. Commercialization of the program has been pretty much avoided.
4. Master Gardener volunteers are remarkably committed to their responsibilities and enthusiastic in their interest in horticulture.
5. The broad based subject matter of a wide range of topics in horticulture has prevailed. Some states have followed the initial training with a greater emphasis on pest identification and problem solving.

There are, however, some things that were parts of the initial program that have been changed or were not anticipated.
1. The first class received training in pest identification and pesticide application and received a private pesticide applicator license when they completed the training. I don’t know of any MG program that is still doing that today.

2. It was originally thought that MGs would receive training, complete their volunteer hours, and be recognized as Master Gardeners. Their assignment was completed. However, it was soon learned that MGs didn’t want to quit! And program administrators recognized the value of having previously trained volunteers wanting to keep volunteering in future years. This required some creative ways of providing additional advanced training. A feature of most MG programs, now, involves ways of ensuring retention to keep MGs for use in future years. Many MGs volunteer hours far beyond their required minimum and volunteer in the program for years.