

## HISTORY

The New River Valley Master Gardener's had a very unique origin and particularly valuable role in the development of the Master Gardener (MG) program statewide. The Virginia Master Gardener program was started on the Virginia Tech Campus in the Office of Consumer Horticulture under the direction of Dr. Diane Relf. As the State Extension Specialist in Consumer Horticulture with among other responsibilities the leadership and educational support for the establishment of the Master Gardener Program Statewide from its beginnings in VA in 1977, Dr. Relf developed funding for a State Master Gardener Coordinator and together they worked with more than 20 Extensions offices in Northern Virginia, Tidewater and Central Virginia with Agriculture Extension Agents who had training in horticulture to develop their Master Gardener Program. In the ensuing years over 20 others offices with Agriculture Extension Agents lacking horticulture training and knowledge decided to start MG programs.

With up to 40 different extension offices conducting training and classes varying from 20 to 75 students for up to 15 lectures each it was not feasible for the University to send their specialists around the state to teach the classes as was being done in smaller states. It became evident that training statewide could be greatly facilitated by the use of quality videotapes made of specialists teaching in a classroom setting with actual new MGs in training. Dr. Relf developed funding for use of the on-campus video production facilities to conduct such a class over a two-year period to produce the required tapes and recruited faculty at VT to teach. The classes were modeled on the chapters of the Virginia Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Handbook. The first year one-half of the classes were taught in the Video Production Studios and half in the classroom. The second year half were taught in the studio and half were taught in the classroom testing the videos for efficacy. When the videos were completed, each class could be taught by any agent in the state using the handbook and the video. Each class was ended with an agent led questions and answer session. Where possible, near-by experienced agents with horticulture training would assist in the establishment of new programs.

In developing a class for “audience” it was found that the Montgomery County Extension Office Agriculture agent was focused on farm management and animal husbandry and had no interest, skills, or willingness to work with Master Gardeners to conduct such a video-taped training session or work with them as volunteers afterwards. It was decided that the class would be a VT Campus MG class under the auspices Dr. Relf and the Virginia Master Gardener Coordinator, Judy Schwab, in the Office of Consumer Horticulture (OCH). This was believed to be the first Campus-based MG group in the U. S. A. The trainees would do their volunteer time in support of the OCH and other educational activities on campus. These included:

- Being a major force in starting the first Advanced Training on campus and continuing in its management, with the annual plant auction being a major fundraiser for local programming
- Assisting in the planning and execution of various MG events at Dr. Relf's house especially the luncheon after the annual MG College.
- Being a major force in the assembly, distribution and use of the educational materials such as the Master Gardener Handbook throughout the state and nationally.
- Volunteer in managing the statewide slide loan library
- Proofing and developing extension educational brochures

- Assisting in research data collection (i.e. small fruit)
- Assisting in FFA and 4-H programming at the state level
- Developing educational material, assisting in appropriate planting and maintenance and serving as docents in the Smithfield Plantation Historic garden
- Assisting in management and upgrading of the VT Presidents' on-campus home, The Grove gardens to show a positive role of plants in the home
- Working at the Horticulture Garden to help move it toward becoming an appropriate educational volunteer experience for the MG.

The Master Gardeners proved to be such an asset and the demand for training was great enough that the classes were continued on Virginia Tech campus with faculty continuing to teach the classes. The State Master Gardener Coordinator and Dr. Relf began to develop policies for conducting programs, a record keeping system for volunteer hours, annual Master Gardener College (i.e. Water Quality, Tree Steward, etc.), thus this group proved to be an asset to the statewide program as the on-campus MGs were frequently the first to test out these materials.

Over the next few years MGs continued to be trained on campus and volunteer on campus and expand into the community with the development of an association and support from OCH. When Montgomery County hired a Cooperative Extension Agricultural agent (Joe Hunnings) who was knowledgeable and willing to include MG in his local programming, the group was transitioned to the local extension office as their home base with training continuing on campus.

In addition, MG volunteers remained a valuable part of the OCH programming for many years especially the Master Gardener College held annually in June. And the videotapes were still being used in most of the Extension Offices with MG training throughout the state to teach some smaller classes into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and as a make-up class for MG trainees who had to miss a lecture.

Today, NRV MG training classes are taught on VT campus and at the Montgomery County Government Center in Christiansburg, VA, during the day, months: February to May, by Virginia Cooperative Extension agents, the Master Gardener Coordinator, Virginia Tech professors and specialists in the community.

**History:**(Paraphrased from Delbert Jones, History article, April 1998, NRV MG Grapevine)  
 “The very first class of the Master Gardeners (MG) taught at Virginia Tech was in 1987. A small class followed in 1988 and was primarily taught using videotapes from the 1987 class. Delbert Jones was in the class of 1989. The MG training class was under the umbrella of the Office of Consumer Horticulture at that time.

Dutch van der Pyle was in the MG class at Virginia Tech in 1987 and along with 3 others; Emily Collins, Arlene Hoffman, and Christine Meunch asked members of the 1989 class to meet and form an association with bylaws and officers. Other MG groups around the state had formed associations and we wanted to be like all the other MG Associations in the state. On April 26, 1989 we passed our bylaws, elected officers for the newly formed Montgomery County Master Gardener Association.

Dutch van der Pyle was the first president and the bylaws stated we were to meet at least two times a year. The members of the first three MG training classes volunteered at five places: Horticulture Garden, Smithfield Plantation, The Grove (VT Presidents' home on campus). They also picked strawberries on a research plot where the original Walmart was and they also worked for the Office of Consumer Horticulture. Today, our 2019 project list includes 80 projects.

The Montgomery County MG Association worked to meet quarterly and after Joe Hunnings, extension agent, was hired in 1995, we were placed under the auspices of the Montgomery County Extension Office. Under Joe Hunnings, the Association took over all the training and volunteer programs. Association presidents were thrilled (and relieved) that all the faculty were still willing to teach the classes. MG training classes were taught at Virginia Tech in Saunders Hall, room 409, top floor, no elevator, classes were at night, Tuesday and Thursday, 6 pm to 9 pm.

In 1994-1995 we realized that many trainees and members did not live in Montgomery County, thus we voted to change the association name to the New River Valley Master Gardener Association. The Association started holding monthly meetings in each of the four counties, fundraising at the Advanced Training/Master Gardener College (plant auction), offered plant clinics, composting demonstrations, and started funding the school grants programs.

We have had great support of Extension Agents in Montgomery, Floyd, Giles and Pulaski counties and the MG coordinators who have given approval of hundreds of projects which allows us to work close to home, on projects we like and to share the VCE's message/mission with the public whether as a plant clinic, working in a garden to educate ourselves and others of plant names or educating others on best gardening practices, explaining the Share the Spare program, attending seminars to learn from others, helping during a garden tour or hosting our annual plant sale.

**Grants:** committees; applications, deadlines, decisions, matrix, mg liaisons assigned to each grant recipient, photos and reports to show projects' beginning and completion.

**Plant Sale and Silent Auction** began as a fundraiser at the annual Master Gardener College, held annually in June at Virginia Tech. 300 or more MGs bid on donated plants and garden related items. Funds raised during the 1990's were used to fund local programming thru the OCH.

Today funds raised are awarded as garden grants in an application process to local schools, nursing homes, to educate others about gardening. The NRV MG's plant sale continues today and is open to the public. The sale is held the Saturday before Mother's Day at the Montgomery County Government Center, Christiansburg, VA

**Rainbarrel Workshops** are a great fundraiser and educational opportunity to learn about using rain runoff to water gardens.

**Share the Spare:** is an on going project to share extra produce, home grown or bought at a farmer's market or gleaned, with the area food banks.

**The Gardens at the Montgomery Museum,** 300 S. Pepper Street, Christiansburg includes a perennial garden interspersed with vegetables and native plant garden. This garden provides communities of native plants that provide habitat for native species. Interaction with visitors to the garden and signs are used to encourage the best gardening practices for our yards to support local food webs. Several groups of volunteers throughout the community work in the garden year round. A journal is kept of the insects, birds, and other creatures that visit the garden.