Working with Volunteers
A Guide for Master Gardener County Coordinators

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Managing a large group of volunteers can be a fun, fulfilling experience but at times can also prove a daunting task for any educator. The Wyoming Master Gardener program poses unique management challenges. This bulletin serves as a resource guide for educators and volunteers.

Recruitment

Managing a volunteer program begins with recruiting willing and eager volunteers. A standard application is available from the Wyoming State Master Gardener coordinator, and county-based educators are strongly encouraged to use it. Effective recruiting methods include advertising in local newspapers, on the radio, on community television channels, posting flyers, Web-based advertising, e-mails, and word of mouth.

Educators should be thinking about recruitment year-round and keep a running tally of the names, addresses, and phone numbers of individuals interested in the program. Recruitment information should be available anytime the Master Gardeners participate in a public venue. Creating a recruitment brochure for your county that can be given to interested parties is highly encouraged. The brochure should be approved by the state coordinator before distribution.

Current volunteers should be encouraged to actively recruit among their friends and peers. Advertising should begin at least a month before training classes are scheduled to begin. Once a pool of applications is obtained, the county educator is encouraged to review them and, if space is limited, select those most interested in volunteering. If space is unlimited, participation by all applicants is encouraged. The county educator should not discriminate in selecting individuals from the applicant pool and must abide by the University of Wyoming’s equality policies. The university recommends at least five volunteers be recruited before a class is offered.

Before enrolling in the class and paying the appropriate fees, participants should be clearly briefed on the nature of the program and understand that a commitment to volunteer is required after the training.

Training

Training should be conducted in such a way to encourage social interaction and accommodate various learning styles. Lectures should be augmented with reinforcing activities. A collection of interactive educational modules can be obtained from the Wyoming State Master Garden-
er coordinator, but each educator is encouraged to develop their own. Positive social interaction is essential in creating a cohesive group of volunteers. Games, labs, group projects, and similar activities allow new volunteers to become acquainted with their peers. The county educator and/or specialist should serve to facilitate positive communication.

Retention

People volunteer for various reasons. Fletcher (1987) provides a list:

1. Seeking community involvement
2. Job skill improvement and resume building
3. Transitioning from one phase of life to another
4. Employees of corporations who wish to remain competitive
5. Retired people who desire to stay engaged
6. People who are particularly enthusiastic about the program or cause
7. Individuals looking to expand or share their hobby
8. People seeking social contacts
9. People new to a community

When working with volunteers, one must be aware an individual’s reasons for getting involved and his or her set of skills will be unique.

From September 2007 to September 2008, an average of 26 percent of the population of the United States volunteered for an organization. During this time, about 24 percent of the population age 65 and older volunteered their services. Across all age groups, a significantly larger number of women volunteer than men. These statistics are supported by current observed trends in the Master Gardener program in Wyoming. Our Master Gardener volunteers are predominantly female, usually retired, and the majority are over the age of 50. Having retired from successful careers, our volunteers come equipped with a host of valuable skills that can be of great benefit to the program. Educators are encouraged to make use of the talents and the existing skill set of the volunteers.

Several Wyoming counties have adopted a policy of awarding emeritus status to elderly volunteers who have remained active in the program, but, due to limited physical abilities, are no longer able to complete volunteer hours. Whether or not a county chooses to implement an emeritus status is dependent on the individual county’s Master Gardener program bylaws; however, creating an emeritus status for physically challenged volunteers is encouraged. Furthermore, the development of volunteer tasks that accommodate any physical limitations of volunteers is a necessity. Volunteers may create raised beds that are wheelchair accessible, schedule mobility-limited volunteers to work in the office instead of participating in yard calls, assign them computer or bookkeeping tasks that can be completed from home, or pair the volunteer with a more able-bodied partner.

In efforts to maintain volunteers and encourage retention, it is strongly recommended extension educators acknowledge the service of the volunteers through rewards and recognition of service. Suggestions include, but are not limited to, “volunteer of the year awards,” special recognition ceremonies for volunteers who return required hours, gifts given to recognize milestones in service, and routine acknowledgement of activities through personal thank-you notes or newsletters.

While the heart of the Master Gardener program is the dissemination of research-based horticulture advice, the social aspect of the program cannot be denied. The establishment of a positive social network within the volunteer body is essential in maintaining committed volunteers. Furthermore, the elements that first draw volunteers to the program are the same ones instrumental in keeping them active.

Wanting to learn new things is often very high on the list of participant goals. Continuing education should be offered for existing Master Gardeners, and volunteers should be encouraged to sit in on classes for new recruits to refresh their skills. Volunteers want to feel useful and be involved in interesting community projects. If new volunteers can be quickly engaged in fulfilling projects, the odds of retention greatly increase. Ideally, time spent on community projects should be offset by an equal amount of time participating in yard calls and supporting the extension staff in the office. Existing volunteers are our best recruiting tools, and retention should be a high priority of each county program.
Conflict Resolution

When working with any group of volunteers, conflicts are inevitable. Volunteers are often passionate about their service, and that passion can sometimes translate into strong opinions and challenging situations. The extension educator or program associate will be routinely called upon to mediate conflicts and resolve misunderstandings. While such interactions are often tense and emotionally charged, there are a few communication tools the educator may wish to employ.

1. Acknowledgement – The educator should acknowledge they have heard and understood the volunteer’s concern.

2. Paraphrasing – The educator might repeat in their own words a condensed version of the volunteer’s stated concern, and then ask, “Did I understand you correctly?” This deliberate form of communication ensures the educator has understood the concerns of the volunteer.4

3. Open-ended question – Ask the volunteer a question that cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no” answer. An example would be, “So, what would a good solution look like to you?” The goal is to shift the focus from fruitless complaining to the development of a constructive solution.

4. Brainstorming solutions – Whenever possible, the educator and volunteer(s) should work together to develop workable solutions. In a group session, it is recommended brainstorming solutions to the given concern involve the use of a whiteboard or flipchart.4

5. Agreement – If an agreement can be reached, it should be written down promptly and a copy given to those present. Memory is fallible and should not be relied upon in the context of agreement. The agreement should be dated, and, if necessary, signed by the parties in conflict. 4

At times, volunteer’s desires will come in direct conflict with county or university policies. There are instances when the educator will be required to refuse the request of a volunteer, and possible negotiations will be limited. If the volunteer challenges the authority of the educator at this stage, they may be referred to the state coordinator.

On occasion, a conflict or misunderstanding can reach a level where formal mediation is necessary. Professional mediation by an outside entity is advised. The Master Gardener state coordinator may perform a formal mediation, or the county-based educator may request a mediator through the Wyoming Department of Agriculture’s mediation program. The mediation coordinator can be contacted at (307) 777-8788. Additionally, several University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service employees are certified mediators, and they may be able to conduct a formal mediation upon request.

Educators are strongly encouraged to use formal mediation when necessary. Such mediation sessions often dissipate anger, and the participation of a neutral third party allows the communication to go more smoothly. Mediation may be used to resolve disputes between volunteers, as well as conflicts volunteers have with their educator. Ideally, mediation should be employed before deep-seated resentments develop that can fracture a volunteer group.
On rare occasions, all attempts at administering to the needs of a volunteer may fail. If the volunteer becomes aggressive or disruptive to the educator and/or their fellow volunteers, they will need to be dismissed.

The Wyoming Master Gardener program continues to grow and serve the citizens of our state. The services provided by our educators and volunteers are invaluable. If you have comments or suggestions that will strengthen the program, please discuss them with your state coordinator at (307) 766-2076.

References


