

WHAT IS A CHARLOTTE COUNTY EXTENSION MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER AND HOW TO DO YOU BECOME ONE?

By Ralph E. Mitchell

Do you enjoy meeting and talking with people? Do you like searching for answers to gardening questions that you or others have? If so, you may be a candidate for the Master Gardener Program! Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who provide the public with gardening programs and activities that draw on the horticultural research and experience of the University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service. Each Master Gardener receives research-based instruction in all areas of home horticulture and is kept up-to-date with the latest developments in home horticulture from Charlotte County Cooperative Extension. In return, Master Gardeners volunteer an equivalent number of hours sharing their knowledge and experience with interested gardeners in the community.

Charlotte County's Master Gardener Program, along with similar programs in other counties in Florida, is directly linked to the University of Florida as part of its national Land Grant College charter. It is this tie to the University that provides Master Gardener's state-of-the-art gardening knowledge. The Master Gardener Program is a national program of trained volunteers who work in partnership with their county Cooperative Extension office to extend horticultural information throughout the community. The first Master Gardener program was started in Washington State in the early 70's. Since then, literally tens of thousands of people have participated and developed strong networks across the country.

Our own Master Gardeners work on a variety of programs and activities. Master Gardeners who work the Plant Lifeline, open Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays from 1:00pm until

4:00pm answer questions and diagnose plant insect and disease problems. Others man booths at shows and fairs talking with people about gardening. Some do talks; others even host gardening radio call-in programs! An educational demonstration garden is also maintained as well weekly plant clinics open across the county. What else - the sky is the limit!



Who can be a Master Gardener? Literally anyone who enjoys gardening and has a desire to share their knowledge and skills in their community. Candidates apply and are interviewed prior to attending the intensive, yet enjoyable training course on all aspects of home horticulture or gardening. Volunteers then volunteer the required amount of time in bringing our educational message to the community. Volunteers are kept up-to-date with regular in-service training. Trips, tours and other special activities round-out the experience, which is as social as it is educational.

A new training program is in the works and should tentatively begin in early March 2008! Give our office a call at 764-4340 for more information and for an application. Or talk

with a Charlotte County Master Gardener Volunteer. They will tell you why gardening is America's number one hobby!

Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our Plant Clinics are available across the county: Plant Lifeline at 764-4340 from 1:00pm until 4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) every Thursday 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** every Thursday 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** 3rd Tuesday of month 9:00am-12:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 1st Saturday of month.
- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3rd Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Extension Service. You may contact him by email (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.