

NEW CROP OF CHARLOTTE COUNTY MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER GRADUATES

By Ralph E. Mitchell, Director/Horticulture Agent of Charlotte County Extension Service

On May 6, 2008, I witnessed 23 new Master Gardener volunteers complete their 50 hours of training and receive certification as full-fledged Master Gardeners. They join a large group of other volunteers who assist the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) local County Extension Service by providing the community with research-based, unbiased information on all aspects of home gardening. The service they provide is invaluable in supplying the increasing demand for common sense tips, suggestions and recommendations that both newcomers and seasoned homeowners need to deal with concerning their lawn and garden issues.

The Master Gardener Program has been in the United States since the late 1970's. Volunteers, trained in all aspects of home horticulture, join with their Land Grant University County Extension Agents to fill the educa-

tional demands concerning America's Number One Hobby - Gardening! Charlotte County has had a Master Gardener Program since 1983. Trained volunteers answer phones, conduct Plant Clinics, manage Demonstration Gardens, and develop and conduct educational programs for the public. This impact is significant! For example, in 2007 Master Gardeners had 23,621 recorded client contacts (phone or office visits); up 4,887 from 2006! Also consider that Master Gardeners volunteered 6,634 hours of volunteer service in 2007 valued at \$124,520.18.

These new volunteers will keep on the cutting-edge by attending at least 12 hours of recertification per year. With regular volunteer opportunities, including networking with University Specialists and leaders in the "Green Industry", Master Gardeners also attend State and National Master Gardener Conferences

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and visit Florida botanical gardens and nurseries. Special interests within volunteer opportunities have involved favorites such as the monthly "Charlotte County Speaks" call-in gardening program. The "sky" is really the limit with what Master Gardeners can do with their volunteer time. In addition to the educational outreach and personal enrichment, the social interaction is also notable. Master Gardeners make lifelong friends and colleagues that enhance living in this gigantic garden we call Florida, that much more enjoyable.

Do you enjoy meeting with people and answering gardening questions? If so, you may want to look into the Charlotte County Extension Master Gardener Program. We take names, addresses, and phone numbers throughout the year and send an application to potential candidates early in the New Year. The application is followed up by an in-person interview. The next Training Class is scheduled for March 2009. Please call our office at 764-4340 for more information.

You can even talk to an actual Master Gardener volunteer on the Plant Lifeline on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 1:00pm until 4:00pm at 764-4340 for gardening help and insight into their role as an Extension volunteer. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our Plant Clinics are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 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 Wednesday of month 9:00am-12:00pm.

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

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** 3rd Saturday of month.
- **Lowe's Garden Center Murdock** 4th Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com) is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for Charlotte County Extension Service. Contact a volunteer Master Gardener from 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.