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At 40, the Extension Master Gardener Program Grows Its Presence in the Community

Kathy ConnollySpecial to Living

In 1980 a young 4-H participant named Nancy accompanied a member of UConn Cooperative Extension's staff, Anne Rideout, to Washington D.C. Their mission was to obtain funding for an innovative outreach program called Extension Master Gardener, begun in Connecticut in 1978. Among those they met were U.S. Senators Abraham Ribicoff and Christopher Dodd, then in his first term.

Their trip was a success. Forty years later, the Master Gardener program is celebrating not only four decades of transforming academic research into science-based gardening skills and techniques that everyone can use, but the enormous contributions of its volunteers. In 2017, 574 master gardeners (MGs) completed a total of 33,609 hours of public service statewide.

The program operates out of eight county extension offices. New London's office, located at 562 New London Turnpike in Norwich, graduated 21 new MGs this year and added 13 new advanced master gardeners as well.

"My very favorite project is a habitat restoration project at Gay City State Park in Hebron," says New London County coordinator Paul Armond. "This was a wonderful collaboration among the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection, the Salmon River Watershed, park staff, and our program."

He also mentions that Camp Harkness is a popular MG destination, where volunteers practice horticulture therapy with adults with disabilities.

At the Middlesex County Extension Office, 1066 Saybrook Road in Haddam, coordinator Gail Reynolds reports 55 active MGs. Their current projects include a model community garden at the Extension Center, gardens at Hammonasset's Meigs Point Nature Center, Mercy by the Sea Center in Madison, Common Good Community Garden in Old Saybrook, the Clinton Community Garden, Cohen Woodlands Butterfly Garden in Colchester, and the Westbrook Town Center parking lot. They also offer outreach at the Haddam Neck Fair, the Durham Fair, and the Portland Fair.

In Pomfret, Windham County master gardeners care for People's Harvest, a 15,000 square foot community garden that produces vegetables for area soup kitchens. People's Harvest is popular with youth groups in the region, who learn about sustainable agricultural methods and food security from the volunteers.

And what became of that young 4-H member who went to Washington? Nancy Ballek Mackinnon went on to get a degree in environmental horticulture and landscape design from UConn. She joined her family's garden center in East Haddam, where she is a co-owner today.

"It always seemed important to bring information to the public about farming and gardening," says Ballek Mackinnon, who went on to teach MGs for years. "The program creates tremendous outreach. Master Gardeners answer questions for the public, but they also makes connections to community gardens, children's programs, and in so many other ways offer critical support for environmental issues and town beautification."

Nancy DuBrule-Clemente of Natureworks in Northford, who speaks at the master gardener conference every year, points out a different contribution.

"For some people, the program is their first segue into the land care business," she says.

DuBrule-Clemente explains that all land care professions have a shortage of qualified labor.

“There aren’t enough young people enrolling in related four-year degrees, but some people become attracted to the field at a later stage,” she says.

While the Master Gardener program is entry-level and not comparable to a degree in landscape design or horticulture, she says, “It’s a great first step.”

Diane St. John of Durham is one such career changer.

“When I moved here in 2006, I was a photographer,” says St. John. “But I wanted to learn more about gardening, natives, and the specific plants that grow here. In 2008 I took the classes, did the volunteer hours, and became a master gardener.”

St. John’s burgeoning interest led her to take horticulture and landscape design classes at Naugatuck Valley Community College.

“I later started at Natureworks unloading trucks and learning plants,” she says.

Today, she is retail manager for the company.

To learn more about the UConn Extension Master Gardener program and how to participate, visit www.MasterGardener.UConn.edu.

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