

Master Gardener Volunteers Mentoring Community Gardeners: Vision and Perseverance

Marianne Sachs, MGV 2004 & Linda Dole, MGV 2006

**...reach out, keep reaching out,
for every gardener knows that after the digging,
after the planting,
after the long season of tending and growth,
the harvest comes.**

Marge Piercy, from *The Seven of Pentacles*

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Last year the American Community Gardening Association called for articles on the subject, "Master Gardeners in the Community Garden" for the upcoming issue of their annual journal, *The Greening Review*. Linda and Marianne's article was accepted and recently published.

Before the era of raised beds and high tunnels, many of today's community gardeners spent time in their grandparents' gardens. They recall "rows and rows of gardens," which their grandparents would harvest and preserve. Today's gardeners long for that same connection to the earth to grow food and feed their own families.

We are part of a program that trains Master Gardener Volunteers to help these dreamers make gardening a reality. Some want to teach young people about connection to the earth, while others want to grow food to donate to their churches. Most feel tied to the local geography and want to build community there.

I recently heard an example of this when a new garden leader told me, "We took all our tomatoes and peppers, knocked on doors in the neighborhood and gave it all away." I recalled that early in the season this garden had been plagued by vandalism and she was making a good faith effort to get the neighborhood's respect by expressing her generosity.

Cleveland has a long history of neighborhood gardening. For most of the twentieth century, the public schools ran the largest and most enduring school gardening program in the United States. Many of our local community gardeners came through that program and are excited to grow their own food once again.

In 2009, the Master Gardeners of Cuyahoga County formed a Community Gardening Committee to support this new impulse. We train fellow Master Gardener Volunteers (MGVs) as mentors to help community members start and grow vegetable gardens. The MGV mentors, who now number 48, stretch the arm of the Ohio State University Extension staff by working one-on-one with garden leaders.

Cuyahoga County with its large, mixed geography, includes an inner city with lots of empty space. Some neighborhoods have vacant lots where houses have been demolished. Each year about 30 new gardens request mentors. The 57 gardens we are mentoring this year include those of schools, churches, apartment buildings, neighborhoods and even the rooftop of a downtown administrative building. Our goal is that a functioning, sustainable garden will be growing in each of these places before the end of each season.

We work directly with the Summer Sprout Program, a partnership between the City of Cleveland and the Ohio State University Extension. Cleveland has historically supported community gardens through Summer Sprout, which provides soil tests, seeds, starter plants, soil amendments, tilling services, and raised bed materials. We also work to serve inner ring suburbs with the Suburban Community Gardening Program, which has a different funding source and more limited resources.

The relationship with the OSU Extension is mutually beneficial. Our meetings and training sessions are attended by the Summer Sprout Program



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The program is structured around a detailed timeline, which we use almost like a recipe. Our year begins with matching gardens to mentors and includes training sessions, communication strategies, evaluation techniques and interfacing with extension staff. We think this timeline could be adapted for use by other MGV groups wanting to play a bigger role in community gardening.

December – make a plan

Extension staff collects information from the community about people who want help establishing a new community garden. They also reach out to established community gardeners to learn about their needs. This information becomes the basis for shaping our year’s strategy.

January – get in touch

The Community Gardening Committee confirms returning mentors by phone, sends emails to recruit new mentors and posts a recruitment announcement in the MGV email newsletter. We also do a presentation to the new class of Master Gardener trainees, who have responded enthusiastically. Later in the month, we match the MGVs with the gardens, mostly by geography, and send out another email with their assignments and an announcement of scheduled trainings.

February – learn to mentor

Each year, we hold two sessions of mentor training so they are accessible to everyone: one on a Saturday at the Extension office in the city and one on a weekday evening at a suburban library. Training ad-

dresses issues related to diversity and self-determination, stressing each garden’s and gardener’s uniqueness, and reviewing basic vegetable and fruit growing techniques. The Extension staff person outlines her supportive role, and describes the supplies and benefits provided to each garden. She also teaches a brief Integrated Pest Management (IPM) refresher course.

We outline the attributes of successful mentors: active listening, dedication to the success of the garden, curiosity and willingness to step outside of one’s comfort zone. A mentor’s job is to support the vision of the gardener, not their own vision.

We stress relationship building as the most important part of this work. We advise flexibility with communication strategies, openness to hearing the stories behind the idea to start a garden and availability to meet. The mentor’s tone should suggest “what can I do for you?” We advise that “I don’t know” can be a valid answer, but ask that mentors follow up with “I’ll find out and get back to you.” This allows mentors to provide research-based information, as mandated by Extension policy. MGVs are instructed to keep track of their time, record their hours for volunteer credit and contact our committee members with questions and problems.

Extension staff contacts garden leaders, informing them of their mentor’s contact information and educating them about the role of the mentor. Their direct communication to the garden leaders has made our initial contact much smoother, since the gardeners know already who will be contacting them.

When they join the program, we provide mentors with a manual, which contains answers to the most frequently asked questions. We include guidance on mentorship, information on the work of the committee and printed materials on techniques such as IPM, weed control, common diseases and references. Please contact the authors if you would like a copy.

March – getting together

In March, we hold a larger training session, “The Meet and Greet.” Here, mentors and garden leaders meet, often for the first time. The scheduled program provides updated information and reviews key as-



A member of our committee teaches Vegetable Gardening 101 and Vegetable Gardening 102 at local libraries. These classes are open to the public, but are specially marketed to mentors and garden leaders, giving participants an additional opportunity to learn together.

The Summer – in the field

MGV Mentors typically visit their gardens every few weeks, depending on the garden's needs and availability of the mentor. The committee continues to meet monthly to plan and process feedback we get informally from mentors.

September – assess the season

We send out a survey to each mentor, asking for an assessment of the gardening season. We are looking for their satisfaction level, the amount of time spent with gardens, the number of gardeners engaged, and suggestions to improve the program.

October – create a schedule

The main task this month is to create a schedule for upcoming trainings, to be held in February and March. We pull together the calendars of 6 committee members and 2 Extension staffers and schedule the public libraries we often use for meeting spaces.

November – review last year

We review returned surveys, which leads to a discussion of how we can improve the program in the

coming year. Because we're a small, autonomous group, changes in focus can be immediately implemented.

We continue to tweak the protocol as we receive feedback from participants, assess attendance, and evaluate the effectiveness of sustained participation. We are currently working on a handout that will chronologically lay out the specific steps of mentoring.

Problems exist. For example, because master gardening tends to attract a more affluent, white demographic than some of the communities we serve, getting MGVs to be comfortable in communities of color can be a challenge. New gardeners may confront obstacles such as poor health or time constraints they had not anticipated, leaving the mentor unmatched mid-season. In general, however, the pride and sense of accomplishment we witness with new community garden leaders when they say, "We've learned so much this year and we'll hit the ground running next year!" makes this a rewarding opportunity for Master Gardener volunteers.

For interesting information on the Cleveland Public Schools Horticulture Program, including a 15-minute video about its history, <http://flash.ulib.csuohio.edu/cmp/feedcleve/cmp-whogrowsthemost.html>.