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Portage County Master Gardener Volunteer Program Exemplifies "The Wisconsin Idea" *By: Ken Schroeder, Ph.D.*

The first Master Gardener Program was initiated in Washington State over 30 years ago to help meet the overwhelming demand for information on horticulture, gardening and plant problems. Volunteers trained to serve the urban audience helped free Extension agents from constantly reacting to public demand and allowed them to be proactive in fulfilling educational needs. The program was a great success, and today there are Master Gardener Programs throughout the United States and Canada.

Wisconsin adopted the Master Gardener concept in the late 1970s. It has been a tremendous success and is now active in nearly all of the state's counties. To date, more than 5,500 people have been trained statewide.

Turn the page to learn more about the Master Gardener Program in Portage County...



Master Gardener Programs have evolved far beyond the initial intent of just answering homeowner questions to undertaking many projects including community beautification, environmental stewardship activities, youth educational programming, and more. But that direct assistance to the local county UW-Extension agent or educator is still an essential component of the program in Wisconsin. Master Gardener Volunteers are key partners in helping deliver horticulture programming in most counties.

Master Gardener Volunteers have become a vital part of Extension's ability to provide consumers with up-to-date reliable knowledge so they can enjoy and protect the value of horticulture and the environment around their homes. The Master Gardener program has also become a fun and useful volunteer network which gives its participants a sense of community spirit, accomplishment, and an opportunity to learn new things.

Source: Wisconsin Master Gardeners Association
2006 Annual Accomplishment Report

Portage County Master Gardener Volunteers Nearly Double in 2007

Master Gardener general training was held January through April 2007 at the Portage County Annex building. Forty-five volunteers graduated after completing 36 hours of training and are working on accumulating the required 24 hours of volunteer service to become Certified Master Gardener Volunteers. With the addition of these new recruits the Portage County Master Gardener association has 104 active members. Last year our association, at 60 members strong, volunteered:

- 57 hours in youth education
- 337 hours in community education
- 2,592 hours in support services
- 1,028 hours of continuing education

The Portage County Master Gardeners are a dynamic and active group, interested in making a difference in the community through education, volunteering, and funding community projects and scholarships.

The Wisconsin Idea signifies a general principle: that education should influence peoples' lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom. In the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea, the university continues to seek ways to extend its influence beyond the boundaries of the campus.

Major Accomplishments or Projects for 2006 in Portage County:

- We helped Head Start develop garden plans, which they had the children plant. The children learned about vegetables and how they grow, and were able to harvest what they grew.
- *Garden Dreams* was a one day seminar for the public we co-organized with Wood County Master Gardeners. It was offered at a nominal cost and had several educational topics as well as demonstrations.
- Some of our members contributed to the handicapped accessible gardening project at the Hancock Agriculture Research Station (ARS).
- We had our annual Plant Sale fund raiser which enabled us to fund two university scholarships this year, as well as buy several Horticulture books for libraries around the county and our own extension resource collection. Other funding went to Wisconsin Public Radio, the Wisconsin Master Gardener Association Foundation, the Hancock ARS, 4-H and our Evenings with Master Gardeners. We also donated to the Louisiana Master Gardener Associations to assist in their efforts to rebuild areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina.
- For the seventh year, Portage County Master Gardener volunteers helped new Habitat for Humanity homeowners design and install their landscape.

For more information about the Master Gardener Volunteer Program, or to become a volunteer, contact Ken Schroeder at 715-346-1318 or ken.schroeder@ces.uwex.edu



The goal of the Master Gardener program is to train enthusiastic volunteers so they can, in turn, provide research-based information on a wide variety of horticultural topics to the general public in their communities.

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