



## Success starts with volunteers!

The success of the Master Gardener program starts with the quality and passion of its volunteers. It is the motivation, enthusiasm, and knowledge of the trained volunteers that makes the Master Gardener program a valued resource for Minnesota communities. As the program coordinator/manager, it is important that you consider the applicants carefully and fairly. The same is true for Master Gardeners serving on selection committees. Incoming volunteers should be familiar with plant science and gardening. They should be representative of the populations they serve, and they should be able to communicate effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. Volunteers should also demonstrate a level of concern for other people, the environment, and for their communities.

### **Before the selection process begins ...**

#### Recruit volunteers

Using local media and word-of-mouth are two good ways to encourage friends and neighbors about becoming Master Gardeners. Brochures are available online and through the State Program office for distribution at county fairs, garden centers, environmental fairs, community ed classes, and other events attended by Master Gardeners. Likewise, people can learn about becoming a Master Gardener via the University of Minnesota Extension website [www.extension.umn.edu](http://www.extension.umn.edu) and the State Master Gardener website [www.mg.umn.edu](http://www.mg.umn.edu) as well as through their county program.

#### Define the needs in your community

It is helpful to consider the needs in your community and how Master Gardeners will help meet those needs through their volunteer opportunities. This will help give your program and the Master Gardeners focus in the coming year. The selection process may help you choose individuals based on their interest in working on specific community projects such as youth gardens, rain garden education, plant diagnostic clinics, ethnic gardens, therapeutic gardens, etc.

#### Selection Suggestions:

- Have a recruitment plan.
- Use media and work of mouth recruitment.
- Decide how many trainees you want and can manage.
- Determine the types of jobs you want the volunteers to perform
- Determine job preferences of potential volunteers by survey or interview.
- Determine the motivation of the applicant.
- Conduct a personal background check.
- Notify accepted and rejected applicants.

## Decide how many interns your program can support

How many interns can the local Master Gardener program support? This is an important question to answer prior to reviewing applications. The number of interns is directly related to the local capacity of your program to manage volunteers. It is helpful to develop the parameters of your selection process based on the desired outcomes of your program as well as the type of program operation and organization structures in place to support the new volunteers.

Questions to ask include:

- Is there paid staff to manage and supervise Master Gardener volunteers or are these functions primarily undertaken by volunteer leaders?
- Is it your goal to maintain the number of volunteer Master Gardeners or do you desire to grow the program?

Remember: the more Master Gardeners in the program, the more time and resources are needed to manage and supervise volunteers.

## **The Selection Process:** **The Application, Interview & Background Check**

The mechanics and process of selection is important. There are three initial steps required in making a good selection of Master Gardener volunteers. Some programs may choose additional steps, like a gardening knowledge test. But, these three steps should be included for all applicants:

- 1. A written application**
- 2. An interview (formal or informal)**
- 3. A personal background check**

### **1. The written application**

A written application will give you contact and demographic data about the applicant. It is a tool that gives the applicant an opportunity to share personal information about his/her education and experiences relevant to being a Master Gardener. The application form might also include some thought questions that will give you an indication of the applicant's horticulture knowledge, how he/she uses information, and how effective the applicant is in communicating information.

The application also includes an "agreement of understanding" that states general expectations to become an intern and a Master Gardener.

A generic application form is found in attachments to this overview. It can be modified to meet specific local program needs.

### **2. The interview**

All applicants should participate in an interview with the local Extension staff coordinator or a MG selection committee.

Based on the number of applicants and local program staff or management, the interview may be as informal as a telephone conversation or as formal as a scheduled meeting with an interview team. An advisory group or a team of experienced Master Gardeners can make up a good interview committee. The interview is an opportunity to learn more about the applicant, make some preliminary assessment about communication abilities and personality style, and lets you learn more about the applicant's motivation to become a Master Gardener. If an applicant is primarily interested in learning about gardening, but not in volunteering or is interested in learning only to improve their own business, this is likely not a good candidate for success of the program. These individuals might rather be encouraged to apply for the "pro-horticulture" core course training.

The interview is also an opportunity to provide some orientation about the local and state Master Gardener program. Use this opportunity to clarify expectations, consequences of not fulfilling expectations, benefits of becoming a Master Gardener, and other relevant information. Allow the applicant to ask questions. It is better to learn now than later in the training if the program's needs and applicant's interests are not a good match.

### Why does an applicant want to become a Master Gardener?

Understanding an applicant's educational interest and motivation for becoming a Master Gardener is another important part of the selection process. The applicant who enjoys helping people by sharing his/her knowledge is more likely to have a higher level of satisfaction and a success as a Master Gardener. On the application form and during the interview process, it is important for the selection committee to ask questions that probe the interest and motivation dimensions (see appendix). Individuals who want to receive training to better manage their own property are not necessarily the best choice of applicants. Likewise, applicants who work in the horticultural industry must understand that they cannot advertise the fact they are a Master Gardener. If applicants are encouraged by their employer to apply as a means of professional training for their job, the selection committee should inform them about the Pro Hort option. Look for applicants that love horticulture and want to share their knowledge with others and have evidence of other volunteer work, such as 4-H, civic organizations, etc.

### What volunteer opportunities interest the applicant?

Use the application process to help identify specific interests or task preferences of applicants. A preference list may be completed by applicants to help the selection committee better understand their areas of interest. This can be important in matching with Master Gardener interns with requirements. Many people are open to any task especially as interns although some may have more narrow preferences. Make sure the individuals you select to be Master Gardener interns understand and are interested in projects that meet program needs.

Regardless of who does the interview, there are several guidelines to follow:

1. Be consistent. Interview all applicants, not just some of the applicants. Not following consistent procedures with all applicants is discriminatory.
2. Do not ask questions about the applicant's age, marital status, children, race, national origin, creed, religion, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, or sexual orientation. Avoid any personal questions other than those that are predetermined by the interviewer/interview team and are pertinent to the applicant's gardening experience and interests. Sample interview questions can be found in the attachments to this document.

### 3. The background check

Conducting a personal background check as part of a volunteer selection process is a recognized best practice of volunteer management. It reduces risk and is a signal that your program is operated with good management practices.

Some Minnesota county Master Gardener programs have administered background checks for many years. Beginning in 2007, we are requiring a personal background check for all incoming MG interns for the 2008 core course training. Background checks have traditionally been conducted on volunteers who work with children or vulnerable adults. Because of varied Master Gardener projects, audiences and levels of local management and supervision, it is in the best interest of the Master Gardener program as well as the new volunteer that background checks are administered consistently on all new interns.

The personal background check should be administered after you have reviewed the application form, conducted an interview, and decided to select an applicant for the program. This avoids unnecessary expenditures for conducting a check on an applicant who will not be selected to enter the program.

There are two options for conducting the background checks:

Option #1 Continue to use your current process for conducting personal background checks if you do so now.

Option #2 Use the process for conducting personal background checks created for the Master Gardener program.

With Option #2, the Master Gardener program will use services of a private employment screening company. This is the same company used by other Extension programs to conduct background checks on volunteers. There is a minimal cost (currently \$6) per name check. The cost per applicant will be higher for an applicant if there are multiple names to check. An overview and instructions for using this process are found in the attachments of this document. Briefly:

- The background checks will be administered through the Extension Regional Center (ERC) associated with your county. An identified person at each ERC will be the person authorized to administer the electronic check.
- Each local Master Gardener program is responsible for covering the cost of conducting the background check. How the fee is covered is up to the local program. In some instances county Extension programs cover the cost, in others costs are covered by the local Master Gardener program, and for others a small fee is assessed from the applicant.
- The local Master Gardener program submits the application consent forms to the ERC. The checks are conducted. If there are no items of concern arising from the check, the local Master Gardener program receives an electronic message confirming that an applicant has been approved. If there is any item of concern listed on the completed check, the local Master Gardener program will be notified. In this case it will be up to Extension staff from the local, regional or state program to make a determination of acceptance of the applicant. In no case should a current Master Gardener volunteer be in a role to make decisions related to this private information.

- The background check consent forms and completed background check document will be held in a locked file at the ERC.

## **After the selection process**

All applicants should be notified following the application and selection process regarding their status. Notify those accepted as well as those not selected. There are sample letters in the attachments to this document. In some cases you may want to maintain several applicants on a waiting list as some trainees will decide later not to participate.

For applicants selected to become Master Gardener Interns, now is the time to continue orientation to the program. It is also time for them to submit to the State Master Gardener program their registration materials and fees for core course.

***Good luck and thank you for your efforts!***