

Highlights of Extension

TYING RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



Extension Volunteers

Article by Stacey Stearns

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Master Gardener Volunteer Tracy Burrell

We have 1,587 active Master Gardener volunteers in Connecticut. In 2015, they donated 34,555 hours of community service to towns and cities throughout the state, with an economic value of \$797,183. Master Gardener offices are in each of the county offices, on the Storrs campus, and the Bartlett Arboretum in Stamford.

Tracy Burrell of Mystic is a Master Gardener volunteer, and president of the Connecticut Master Gardener Association (CMGA), the Master Gardener alumni group. CMGA is a non-profit, all volunteer group that provides scholarships to interns, stipends to the UConn Extension Master Gardener Coordinators, and outreach grants for Master Gardener volunteer projects across the state. In 2014, Tracy also served on the UConn Extension Centennial Committee.

“I became a Master Gardener in 2008,” Tracy begins. “It was something that I was always interested in, and that year, I was finally able to do it. It is a gateway to a whole new world, and becomes all encompassing. You want to learn more and more. As your interests and skills change and develop, there is always someone that you can talk to in the program.”

Tracy continued taking classes and volunteering, and is a Ruby volunteer, the top level in the program. She is also a Master Composter, and an instructor in that program. Through her position as president of CMGA, Tracy works with all of the UConn Extension Master Gardener locations. “Meeting the people is my favorite part about being a Master Gardener,” Tracy says. “I travel regularly to all of the Extension Offices and to the Bartlett Arboretum— the energy and enthusiasm of Master Gardeners is wonderful!”

Reflecting on her own learning experiences through the MG program, Tracy cites learning about rain gardens as a prime example of learning to embrace the landscape, instead of trying to fight it, and being frustrated and disappointed.

“I grew up in a volunteer family; it is natural for me to volunteer,” Tracy concludes. “I think it is a natural part of the American character, as noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in his Democracy in America and more recently by President Obama encouraging folks to volunteer. Master Gardeners provide a unique bridge between the knowledge we learn via the university and the knowledge we gain from interacting with Connecticut’s citizens.”

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Article by Kim Colavito
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4-H Volunteer Marcia Johnson

Twenty-eight years as an elementary school teacher has not dampened the enthusiasm of 4-H volunteer Marcia Johnson. She's upbeat, energetic and clearly excited about teaching. Five years ago, Johnson created a school gardening program for her students at John Barry Elementary School in Meriden. When Johnson took a position at Meriden's Nathan Hale School, she created the 4-H Environmental Education and Garden Club. She says, "I love the 4-H curriculum, and the kids really enjoy it." In 2013, Johnson brought the Junior Master Gardener curriculum to her program, and a year later, she decided to complete the 4-H volunteer training so she might bring 4-H to students in her after-school and summer clubs. This year, thirty students joined the club from grades three, four, and five. High school students volunteer to assist with the program.

"I am by no means a gardening expert," says Johnson. "I am learning along with the kids. For two years before we planted our first seed, I collected information on gardening curriculum at every grade level. I'm always searching online for gardening ideas. I would love to take the Master Gardener Program at UConn." The students planted eight raised beds filled with strawberries, eggplant, zucchini and yellow squash, basil and green beans, in addition to a few annual flowers chosen to attract pollinators. Johnson added a hydroponic tower to house a lettuce crop. She uses the harvested produce to teach the children healthy cooking and food preparation. Students take produce home as well.

Umekia Taylor, associate extension educator with UConn Extension, was so impressed with Johnson's program, she awarded the school a 4-H CT FANs *IM* mini grant that provided raised bed kits, curriculum materials and tools, as well as programming assistance. Over the summer, two 4-H CT FANs *IM* staff spent two days a week with Johnson's students, providing fun activities that focused on gardening, nutrition, and fitness.

Johnson is continually looking for new club activities to provide experiential learning for her students. She brought in chicken eggs to incubate in the classroom, and set up honey tasting with a local beekeeper. Johnson never tires of working with her students. "It's the best part of my day. The kids just love it and they never want to go home."

Johnson received the 2013 and 2014 Connecticut AgriScience Award sponsored by the Connecticut Corporators to the Eastern States Exposition (The Big E). She is also the recipient of the American Farm Bureau's White Reinhardt Award and received a grant from the Connecticut Agricultural Education Foundation.

"I can't get over how fascinated the kids are to see things grow from a seed," Johnson says. "We live in such a technological society where kids go to a restaurant and food suddenly appears. We rarely take the time anymore to teach children about nature."