Our Program’s Mission
The Alabama Master Gardener program trains individuals who volunteer their expertise and services supporting the educational outreach mission of Extension. The program aspires to create an environmental awareness and enhance the development of an environmental ethic in the citizens of Alabama.
(Photos: 1. Demonstration at Chilton Research and Extension Center, Chilton Co MGA, 2. Demonstration at Prattville in Prattville, Autauga Co MGA, 3. Flora, Fauna Festival at Lanark Park, Autauga Co MGA)
Partners with Extension Educational Outreach

In 1971, two Washington State Extension Agents, David Gibby and Bill Scheer, seeing the high demand for home landscape information, explored the novel concept of recruiting and training volunteers to meet this need. The initial response was tremendous and so began a now national Extension program that educates volunteer-minded people.

The Alabama Master Gardener program started when a Master Gardener from New York, Mary Lou McNabb, shared her love of the program with Madison County Extension Agent Gary Murray. Along with a couple of Extension Specialists, they organized the first Alabama Master Gardener training series in Huntsville.

Since 1981, Master Gardeners have partnered with ACES and various community groups, hosted displays and information booths at county fairs, assisted botanical gardens with numerous efforts, worked with historic properties, implemented civic beautification projects, partnered with local schools, donated 100’s of tons of fresh produce to charity, supported scholarships in secondary education, and much more.

Alabama Extension offered Master Gardener training classes in 22 locations and trained participants from 33 counties in 2014.

Lunch & Learn
Many hands make light work

It’s an age-old story; no one can be two places at one time; much less in six spots. And yet, program interest for home horticulture remains high. Home Grounds Extension Agents and Master Gardeners coordinate short programs during the lunch hour once a month. Teamwork wins a star in Autauga, Calhoun, Dale, DeKalb, Elmore, Houston, Madison, Mobile, Montgomery, and Morgan counties!

County Fairs, information booths, and other public displays are a favorite outreach activity with MG volunteers. Other venues include the Peanut Festival, local libraries, the Festival of Flowers, Eufaula Pilgrimage, East Alabama Home and Garden Show, Market on the Square, Dallas County Farmer’s Mkt, Kenan’s Mill, various retail outlets, botanical gardens’ plant sales, Fall Gardening Extravaganza, and more. All totaled, these efforts made contact with 222,103 people in 2014.

(photo: pH testing, Master Gardeners of North Alabama)
Demonstration Gardens
Serve double duty

Demonstration gardens are installed and maintained by Master Gardeners at Extension offices, public parks, botanical gardens, churches, schools, historic places, and Research & Extension Centers. They promote research-based, best management principles for home landscapes and gardens whether hosting workshops or when visitors stroll by. Several of these special teaching gardens also donate many tons of fresh produce to food charities every year.

These gardens are currently maintained by Master Gardeners from Autauga, Baldwin, Blount, Calhoun, Cherokee, Chilton, Clay, Coffee, Cullman, Dallas, Dale, Elmore, Etowah, Hale, Houston, Jackson, Jefferson, Lauderdale, Lee, Limestone, Marshall, Madison, Mobile, Montgomery, Morgan, Pike, Russell, Shelby, St. Clair, Tallapoosa, Tuscaloosa, and Walker counties.

How many Master Gardeners does it take…?

Answer: I don’t know, but they’ll make sure they have enough people to get the job done. Partnerships large and small make the Master Gardener program one of the most successful volunteer programs in the nation.

A special 2014 thank you goes to these Master Gardener associations: Autauga Co MGA, Baldwin Co MGA, Capital City MGA, Central Alabama MGA, Chilton Co MGA, East Central Alabama MGA, Master Gardeners of North Alabama, Mobile Co MGA, and Wiregrass MGA for their contributions and support given to the 2014 National Association of County Agriculture Agents (NACAA) Conference hosted in Mobile, Alabama.

(Photos: 1. Display at NACAA, Mobile Co MGA, 2. Garden project at Jehovah Jireh, Master Gardeners of North Alabama)
Reach ‘Em, Teach ‘Em Classroom
Youth Programs Category: The Blount County Master Gardeners have supported an outdoor classroom at Locust Fork High School’s consolidated campus for six years.

The educational goals are to use hands-on activities to teach: the benefits of gardening, healthy eating and nutrition, sustainable garden management, and instill an appreciation of the outdoors in all K-12 students at this campus.

Over 1,200 students have lessons in or interact with this garden each year through summer camps, JrMG clubs, counseling, and/or curriculum and enrichment activities.

As a result, everyone notices the students making new food choices, enjoying academics based in the garden, and increased school pride (sense of teamwork, truancy/absenteeism <10%/+, less litter and graffiti).

Grandmother’s Garden
Demonstration Garden Category: This garden project at Sloss Furnace National Historic Landmark illustrates an early 1900’s garden the typical worker family had. The wives and children of Sloss Company workers grew much of their own food and found their pharmacy in the garden too. The garden displays period garden plants and practices.

The project goals were to educate visitors and create a new reason to visit.

Marjorie White with the Birmingham Historical Society reports that visitors increased by 800 in 2014. The Jefferson County Master Gardeners learned about heirloom vegetables and medicinal herbs through their research preparing the garden, and the park gained a new educational display.

Florence Community Gardens
Community Service Category: The Shoals Master Gardeners built the Florence Community Garden located in front of the Lauderdale County Extension Office.

Their project includes 52 raised beds used for demonstration (3) and for neighbors (49) to have vegetable gardens. Special attention was given to accessibility for everyone so some beds were built 24” tall for gardeners in wheelchairs, and the path between beds was 48” wide.

Over 2,000 pounds of produce was harvested in 2014, MG’s enjoyed mentoring, 49 neighboring families learned to garden and benefited from their labor, and 80% of the gardeners committed to return next year.

Many community partners: municipal, civic, commercial and volunteer, joined together for the success of this project.
Outdoor Classrooms

A common characteristic in all Master Gardener volunteers is a spirit of sharing. They are motivated to learn new things, seek people and places that need their talents, offer assistance, and make new friends all along their journey. The Walter Jackson Elementary School in Decatur benefitted from their friends in the Morgan County Master Gardener Association this year. New raised beds were built and planted.

Beautification Projects

Some people see these as an expression of civic pride, support to economic development, displays for teaching, or just plain volunteer enjoyment. Master Gardeners take information they’ve learned from their training with Alabama Extension, make partnerships for donations, and mix in some ingenuity to build public plantings large and small. This project was at the Chilton County Extension Office in Clanton.

Just for Fun

Whether it’s a seasonal display at a botanical garden, a library, or a civic festival, Master Gardeners enjoy sharing their creativity with the community. Mr. McGregor, here at the Dothan Area Botanical Gardens, was part of the fall 2014 scarecrow contest. This and similar annual events at other venues draw visitors and peak interest in gardening.

Community Gardens

The Garden of Eatin’ at Jubilee Shores United Methodist Church in Fairhope is one example of the many community or charity food gardens that Master Gardeners host and partner with across Alabama. Churches, schools, civic programs, Extension offices, and others allow use of their property or partner with Master Gardeners to grow fresh produce for people in need. The Garden of Eatin’ has plots for rent to local individuals and another garden area is designated to growing vegetables which are donated to local food pantries in Baldwin County.
Ace Community Partners

(Photos: 1. Earth Day at Cane Creek, Calhoun Co MGA, 2. Beautification project, Jackson Co MGA, 3. Prattvillage garden, Autauga Co MGA.)