



Retaining Extension Master Gardener Volunteers

Improving Communities and Expanding Opportunities

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Photo by Connie Kinnett

The lifeblood of non-profits are the donors who provide funding for projects and the volunteers who carry out the mission of the organization. Critical components to sustaining the mission of non-profits include the ability to simultaneously recruit new volunteers while retaining experienced volunteers.

Why do volunteers drop out of an organization only to reappear in another? A volunteer might feel underappreciated for their efforts, lose interest to another cause, or desire a new challenge that better fits their interests or background. When effective volunteers leave for “greener pastures,” organizations can find it difficult to accomplish their mission. We all understand that dependable volunteers are vital to the success of non-profit organizations. However, program coordinators often struggle to continually provide training, recognition, and new challenges that motivate dedicated volunteers to stay committed to the mission of the organization.



The Purdue Master Gardener Program

The Purdue Master Gardener Program (PMG) trains gardening enthusiasts to assist Purdue Extension with home horticultural education in local communities. The Master Gardener Program began in 1972 in Seattle, Washington, in response to public demand for home gardening information. The Indiana Master Gardener Program started in 1978 with four counties: Allen, Lake, Marion, and Vanderburgh. The name of the program later was changed to the Purdue Master Gardener Program. More than 50 Indiana counties offer the PMG.

Participants in the program pay the local fee for 13 to 19 training sessions on horticultural topics taught by a combination of University Extension Specialists, Extension Educators, other Master Gardener volunteers, and professional horticulturalists.

The PMG Basic training consists of the following required and optional horticulture topics:

Required Topics:

- PMG orientation
- Pesticide safety and pesticide alternatives
- Soils and plant nutrition
- Plant science
- Weed identification and control
- Plant disease diagnosis
- Insect identification and control
- Animal pests
- Lawn care
- Herbaceous ornamentals
- Woody ornamentals
- Vegetable gardening

Examples of Optional Topics:

- Home fruit gardening
- Indoor plant care
- Landscape design
- Yard waste management
- Local horticulture tours

The program is a “train-the-trainer” outreach. PMG volunteers are given specialized training in horticulture with the intent that they will share what they have learned with others. The motto of the PMG, “Helping Others Grow,” reflects this focus on educational outreach and local impact. At the conclusion of the required training, participants take a final exam. A minimum score of 70% is required to earn PMG Intern status.



Photo by Gene Matzat

TABLE 1. MINIMUM CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Certification Level	Cumulative Volunteer Activity Hours	Cumulative Educational Training Hours
Master Gardener	35	35
Advanced Master Gardener	60	45
Advanced Master Gardener Bronze	200	60
Advanced Master Gardener Silver	500	75
Advanced Master Gardener Gold 1,000	1,000	100
Advanced Master Gardener Gold 2,000	2,000	200
Advanced Master Gardener Gold 3,000	3,000	300
Advanced Master Gardener Gold 4,000	4,000	400
Advanced Master Gardener Gold 5,000	5,000	500

Minimum Certification Requirements, PMG Program.¹ (Note: A PMG Program policy revision is planned for August 1, 2019. Visit <https://www.purdue.edu/hla/sites/master-gardener/> for current PMG Program policy information.)

PMG Interns are also required to complete at least 35 volunteer hours in approved activities to achieve their Master Gardener certification. To remain active as a certified PMG, volunteers are then required to contribute at least 12 volunteer and six continuing education hours each year. Many PMG volunteers contribute well above these minimum requirements to earn Advanced PMG levels beyond their initial certification (See Table 1).

Retaining Volunteers

A sampling of Indiana counties showed that an average of 70% of PMG interns complete their minimum of 35 volunteer hours required for certification. Overall, that might be considered a good percentage, but actually the range of 50% to 90% of volunteers completing their volunteer hours is a concern.

Why is there such a large variation in percentages among this sampling of counties? Are there ways a PMG County Coordinator can encourage interns to continue their involvement in the program?

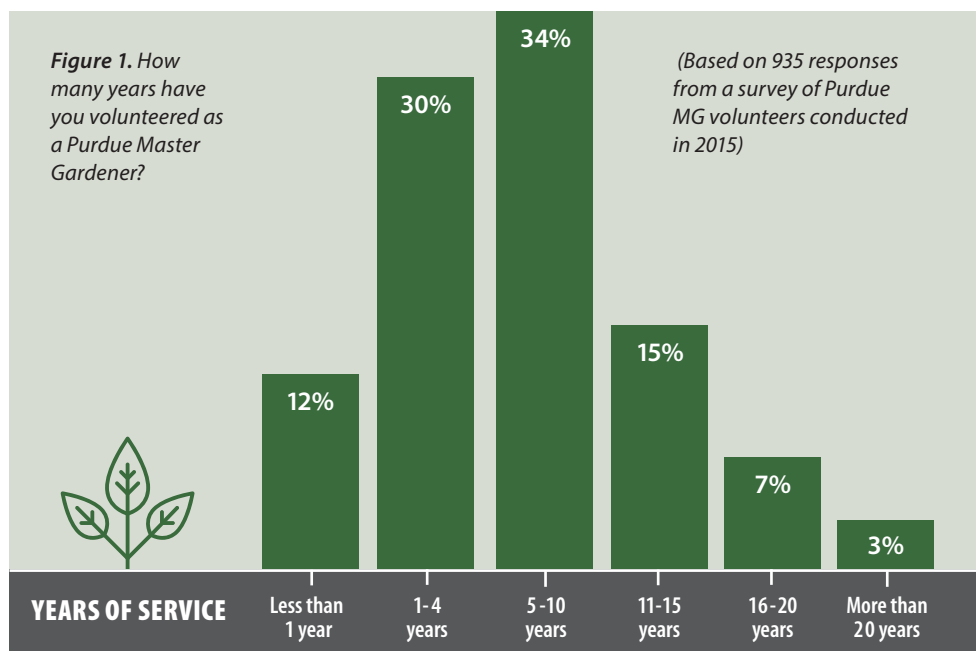
A Qualtrics² online survey was sent by email to PMG volunteers to measure program impacts and collect demographic information. One question asked PMG volunteers how many years they had served as a PMG. The largest number of responses reported was 5-10 years (See Figure 1). The number of responses decreased for survey choices where

PMG volunteers indicated serving more than 10 years (See Figure 1). This may indicate that fewer volunteers are involved in the PMG Program or that simply fewer volunteers with 10 or more years of service answered this survey question. A national study reported that Extension Master Gardener volunteers serve their respective programs an average of 7.7 years.³

In these cases, the PMG Program not only loses active volunteers, but there is also a loss of experience, knowledge, and mentoring. This loss of dedicated volunteers can hinder the county PMG Program from accomplishing its purpose in local communities. Purdue Extension Educators who serve as County Coordinators can find it challenging to know how to encourage these valuable, well-trained volunteers to continue their long-term commitment to the program.

Why do volunteers leave after investing so much time and energy into the program and community? To help address this question and to provide some insights into volunteer retention, eight PMG County Coordinators with successful programs were interviewed.

All coordinator interviewees were asked, "What do you do to help retain volunteers?" The hope was that their advice might help others who are coordinating PMG programs to improve retention of volunteers.





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HERE ARE SOME IDEAS AND TIPS THE SUCCESSFUL COORDINATORS SHARED:

Initial Screening of Applicants for Master Gardener Basic Training

- Ask training applicants on the enrollment application to write a brief essay on why they want to become a PMG volunteer. This helps the potential participant communicate to the coordinator why they want to apply to the PMG Program.
- Form a committee of experienced PMG volunteers to work with the PMG County Coordinator to review applications for the initial training program. Committee members can work together to contact applicants with incomplete applications to ask for further information about their desire and qualifications.
- Market the PMG Program as a volunteer opportunity, not a “gardening class.”
- Consider asking the following questions on the enrollment application to separate those who just want to learn more about gardening from those who want to use their new training and past gardening experience to serve as a volunteer:
 - Why do you want to become a PMG?
 - What are your prior volunteer experiences?
 - When would you be available to volunteer? During the day? Evenings? Weekends?
 - What skills could you bring to the PMG Program? (Topic interests, computer skills, career training, organizational training, writing, answering phones, etc.)

- Use the information collected during the application, screening, and selection process to more effectively match new volunteers to experienced mentor volunteers, projects, and tasks that showcase their interests, unique skills, past experiences, and prior training.
- Understand that some applicants will not be suited for the program.

Communicate with Training Participants During the Basic Training Sessions

- Form an email group for the PMG class to enable trainees and the coordinator to communicate during the training. PMG County Coordinators can use this email group to communicate class updates, assignments, answers to class questions, and instructions for future training sessions.
- Create a password-protected class website to post handouts or recordings of previous classes for participants to make up missed classes. Blackboard “Course Sites”⁴ may be a useful tool for this purpose. And, Kaltura⁵ is a simple tool for posting videos of class sessions.
- Create a class PMG County Facebook page for posting updates, photos, volunteer opportunities, and event announcements. Facebook groups can also be created for each class to encourage more camaraderie among trainees. This can be particularly helpful for larger classes.
- Provide each participant with a flash drive loaded with Extension publications, handouts, and other information relevant to coursework, or post class information to an online file storage website.

Connect with Master Gardener Basic Training Participants

- Make direct contact with each trainee to get to know and assist them during the training.
- One PMG County coordinator answers a new question about herself each week posed by trainees. Questions asked to the Educator included:
 - Which university did you graduate from?
 - What was your major?
 - What is your favorite color?
 - What is your hometown?
 - What is your favorite candy?
 - What is your favorite gardening activity?
- That same coordinator distributes the trainees’ nametags on week 6 to test her memory of trainees’ names rather than allowing them to pick up their nametags at the start of class.

- Make sure all PMG volunteers know how to contact the coordinator when the need arises.
- Send a personal or class card or note to PMG volunteers who become ill or when a family member dies, or to celebrate weddings, births, or a new job.

Help Purdue Master Gardener Program Volunteers Connect with Each Other

- Five of the eight PMG County Coordinators had the opinion that membership in the local Master Gardener Association was one of the primary reasons why volunteers continued their involvement in the program. Social activities and connectivity with ongoing community projects are among the incentives for volunteers to join the local association.
- Invite Master Gardener Basic Training participants to attend local Master Gardener association meetings.
- Schedule seasoned PMGs to attend training sessions to share their experiences as a volunteer.
- Have existing Master Gardeners welcome new trainees to class sessions or assist with snacks and administration of the training sessions.
- Coordinate a PMG mentoring program where experienced volunteers are paired with new students/interns to provide assistance to trainees during their initial training and their first year as an intern.
- Organize opportunities for basic training participants to volunteer under the supervision of the PMG County Coordinator or an experienced PMG volunteer to learn what it's like to volunteer or learn about project opportunities.
- Provide every opportunity for the class members to bond as a team so that they would desire to come back and feel like they belong to the program.

Express Appreciation and Recognize Volunteers for Their Efforts

- Recognize outstanding members annually by presenting special recognition awards.
- Publicize volunteers' efforts in the community through news releases or in public areas where others can see the good work they do in communities.



La Porte County Master Gardeners' "wall of fame" that highlights the successes of the local program. Photo by Tina DeWitt



A PMG County Coordinator handed out these recognition gifts to Master Gardeners — Purdue Extension tape measures with an inspirational quote and word of "thanks." Photo by John Orick

- Combine times of recognition with celebration and socializing, such as holding an awards banquet, picnic, or barbeque.
- Celebrate by honoring PMGs when they have earned a new certification level. (See Table 1.)

Provide Training and Information About Volunteer Opportunities

- Organize a volunteer project showcase where MG project leaders present tabletop displays and other MG interns or existing MG volunteers can ask questions and sign up for volunteer opportunities.
- Provide an updated list of all projects, project leader contacts and important dates for upcoming volunteer opportunities to interns and existing volunteers.
- Provide training on giving home horticulture presentations. Some coordinators require trainees to give a short presentation during their training. Often the person will speak about their interest in gardening.
- Take advantage of opportunities to teach them about Purdue Extension and the university's land-grant mission.
- Continue to build partnerships in the community in projects or programs appropriate for PMG volunteer activities in horticulture. This keeps volunteers engaged and challenged by helping volunteers to see new ways they can help others learn more about gardening.

- Provide regular opportunities for volunteers to receive continued training in horticulture topics and connect with each other. Many volunteers thrive on the opportunities to learn more about gardening. Offer advanced training sessions on horticultural topics and organize a meal or other social activities. Ask for volunteer input about additional training topics beyond the required core topics. (Refer to list on page 3.)

Evaluate Local Master Gardener Program On a Regular Basis

- Meet with Master Gardeners (interns and certified) to ask for their feedback about the local training and program.
- Ask for feedback during the training through weekly evaluation forms or cards.
- Simple online surveys can be created using Qualtrics² or another online survey tool.
- Develop a workable plan for improving the PMG Basic Training in your county and improving your connection with volunteers and their connection with the program and existing PMGs.
- Consider evaluating community service projects periodically with PMG volunteers.



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What Motivates Volunteers?

Also important to volunteer retention is understanding their motivation to participate. Different individuals are motivated for different reasons. David C. McClelland, in *The Achieving Society* (1961),⁶ identified three categories of motivational needs: achievement, affiliation, and power. Each person has a motivational category that is dominant.

A person motivated by achievement seeks to take personal responsibility for finding solutions to problems. The achievement-motivated person desires to achieve unique accomplishments, appreciates concrete feedback, and seeks tangible rewards. This person is focused on achieving goals and overcoming obstacles.

The person motivated by affiliation is concerned about being liked and accepted and looks forward to friendly interaction. This person is motivated by group projects, and prefers not to be separated from others. The affiliation-motivated person thinks about feelings of others and looks for ways to help people and develop relationships.

A power-motivated person has a goal of impacting and influencing others. This person is motivated by opportunities to be persuasive, give advice, and teach others. A power-motivated person is often verbally fluent, outspoken, and provides important direction to the program.



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As a PMG County Coordinator, think about the following questions when motivating your volunteers:

1. What are aspects of the PMG program where effective motivation could encourage individuals to volunteer more consistently?
2. How can you help volunteers feel motivated and/or appreciated?
3. What steps will you take to improve the motivation of your PMG volunteers?

**FIGURE 2.
THEORY AND APPLICATION OF MOTIVATING VOLUNTEERS**

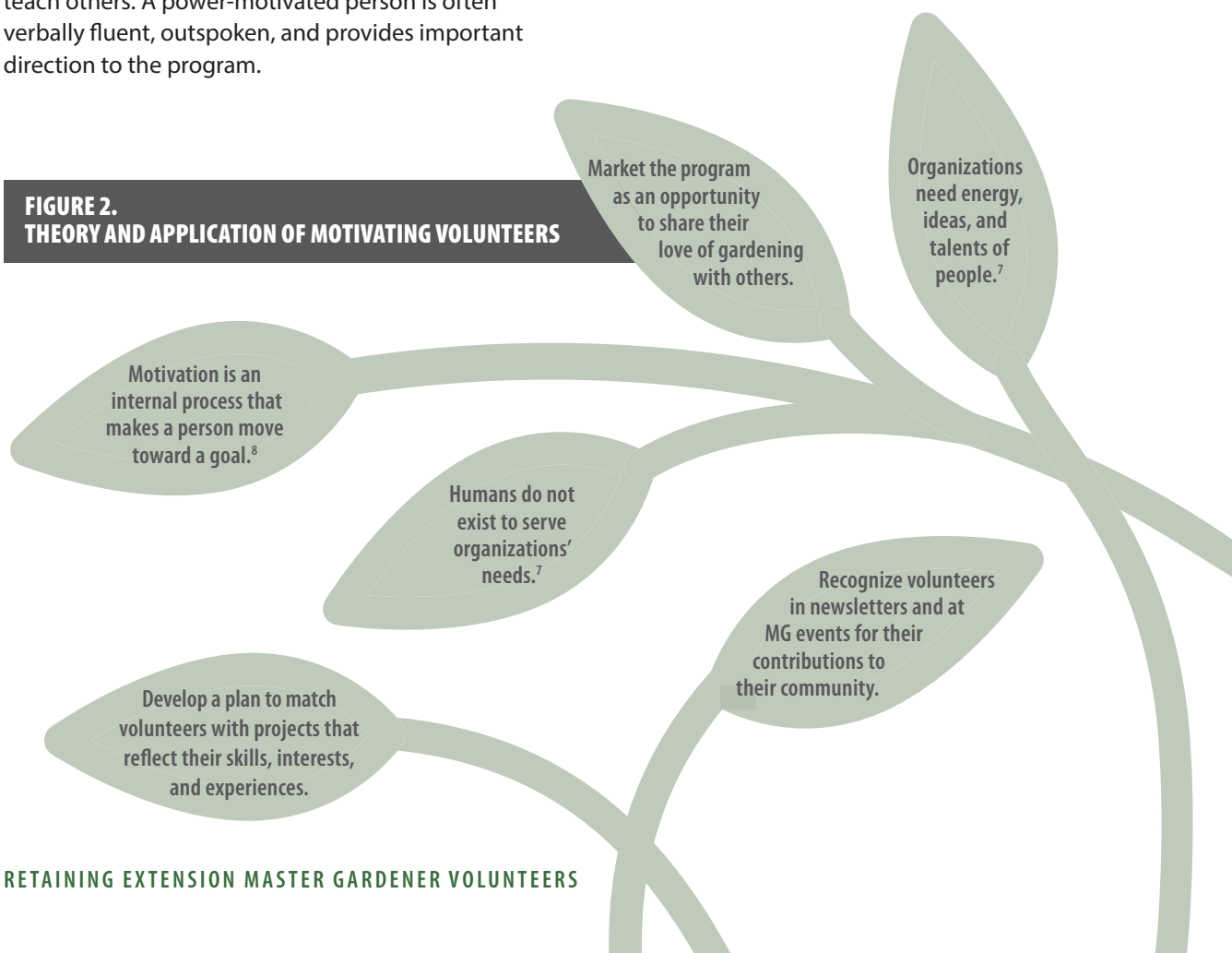




FIGURE 3. TIPS FOR MOTIVATING VOLUNTEERS⁹

Show appreciation for what they do.

Build community by providing opportunities for volunteers to connect.

Equip them through regular training.

Respect their time by matching them with effective projects.

Share the impacts of their efforts with them and others.



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Conclusions

Purdue Master Gardener volunteers enable Purdue Extension to reach significantly more Indiana residents with unbiased, research-based home horticulture information. Without volunteers, many community programs would not be delivered each year. Although the PMG Program has a cadre of experienced and knowledgeable volunteers, more can be done to retain these invaluable volunteers. A positive and encouraging approach to coordinating the PMG program that includes training, recognition, and new challenges will motivate dedicated volunteers to stay committed to the mission of assisting Purdue Extension with home horticulture education in Indiana communities.

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