

## April 19-25, 2020 is National Volunteer Week

in the United States and has been celebrated annually since 1974. For Extension Master Gardeners this is an opportunity to celebrate the impact of our volunteer service. **Ever wonder why the Extension Master Gardener program was created? Do you know where it all began?**

In 2017 at Virginia's 30<sup>th</sup> annual Master Gardener College, I was fortunate to hear the keynote talk "The History of the EMG Program" by Dr. David Gibby, known as the Father of Extension Master Gardeners. Here is his story. Dr. Gibby had just finished obtaining his doctorate in botany from Utah State University and had been hired to stay on to teach. He had just gotten married and bought his first home when he was told that Utah State had budget cuts and that his job was being eliminated. He hustled to find a job and took an Area Extension Agent position in the Tacoma, Washington, metro area. He and another ANR agent, Bill Scheer, focused respectively on urban and commercial horticulture. When he first sat at his desk, Dr. Gibby discovered stacks of phone messages that had accumulated from the public, and they kept coming. The community's demand for information about plant problems was so intense that it was virtually impossible for Dr. Gibby and his colleague to provide the educational response that was clearly needed.



Initially administrators suggested they get information out via the mass media and that would solve the problem. Dr. Gibby worked hard to develop FAQ sheets, publish articles on timely topics and produce radio spots and TV gardening shows. These efforts served only to make the public more aware that the Extension office was the place to get help, further overwhelming the two agents. Dr. Gibby was so discouraged he thought about quitting. There just weren't enough hours in the day to do his job well. Dr. Gibby then started thinking about how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints functioned with volunteers to meet its mission. He approached his fellow agent and his administrators with the concept of recruiting and training volunteers to serve the urban audience. Brainstorming occurred. Recruitment would require a careful selection process. An appropriate and distinguished title would also be necessary. As it happens, both Gibby and Scheer had worked in Germany and they knew that Germans bestow titles for hard-earned proficiency levels...such as "Gartenmeister" for the top proficiency level in horticulture. Anglicized as "Master Gardener," this title would be appropriate for volunteers who had received extensive training.

The volunteer concept was widely discussed and taken to various levels of administration, but it initially met resistance from specialists. In 1972, Dr. Gibby decided to test the viability of the concept with a trial clinic at the Tacoma Mall designed to gauge public interest. He arranged for Sunset magazine to cover the trial clinic, resulting in an article under the headline "Wanted: Expert Gardeners to Become Master Gardeners". There were about 600 initial inquiries. Dr. Gibby interviewed all applicants and accepted 300. He then developed the training curriculum to include culture of ornamental plants, lawns, vegetables and fruits; control of plant diseases, insects and weeds; and safe use of pesticides. Eight-hour sessions were held one day a week for five weeks. At the end, the volunteers were required to pass an exam and the graduates then committed to volunteering a specified number of hours working with the gardening public.

This program took off, and within the year, training classes were being given in several other areas. Dr. Gibby had to apply for funding several times before it was approved and at the end of the following year, he resigned from his position. Sharon Collman, who had worked as a program assistant with Dr. Gibby, became the Extension Agent and is credited with building a solid foundation for the program as well as promoting and expanding it. She held the program together under the hardship of long hours during budgetary constraints and helped Extension offices establish the program in Washington and other states. Many folks contributed to growing this volunteer program to better manage the urban horticulture educational efforts. The horticulture "Master" volunteer concept became so effective that it has spread

National Volunteer Week, continued

throughout the United States and has become internationally recognized and duplicated as a model for other volunteer programs.

## Albemarle-Charlottesville

125 Master Gardeners  
19 Master Gardener Interns  
23 Emeritus



CONTRIBUTING A TOTAL OF

**13,386 volunteer hours**

VALUED AT

**\$388,194\***

\*Based on a value of \$29.00/hour from Independent Sector 2019 Value of Volunteer Hours by State

TO ALBEMARLE COUNTY

AND MADE



16,259 direct educational contacts

IN THE 2019 YEAR



Extension Master Gardener training was first offered in Virginia in 1978, and in Albemarle County in 1986. There are now 62 EMG units throughout the state, comprising 4,800 EMG Volunteers. In 2019 alone, we made 611,485 contacts and provided 397,018+ hours of service, with an economic value of more than \$10.9 million. (See image for the Albemarle-Charlottesville unit statistics.) We are part of a great national movement; the 2018 Extension National Report counted 86,076 EMG's contributing 5.6 million volunteer hours.

Wow, I am glad that Dr. Gibby did not walk off the job in frustration and instead problem solved and developed this unique volunteer program, allowing thousands of people like me to turn our passion for gardening and the environment into

meaningful educational experiences. Today, helping folks to solve their horticulture questions through our education programs is what Extension Master Gardener volunteers are all about. We can make a difference. Think about the positive impact that Dr. Gibby's program decision has had on thousands of EMG Volunteers and the trickle-down effect on the folks we teach and engage.

For National Volunteer Week, let's celebrate our service and the inspiration we provide for gardeners throughout this community.

*Fern Campbell*