

IMPACT

University of Idaho
Extension

Latah County, 208.883.2269, Fax: 208.882.8505
220. E. 5th Street, Suite 325, Moscow, ID 83843

Latah County Master Gardeners provide community service and education

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Latah County Extension Master Gardener program fulfills a long-term need for local gardening and horticultural service and education.

The Situation

Latah County is predominantly rural with a 100-year history of agricultural and gardening activity. The first farmer-pioneers planted fruit trees and gardened to provide their own fresh food supply. Recent generations have relied more heavily on the purchase of fresh food. Regaining gardening knowledge, including information on effective home-based fruit and vegetable production, are important to the citizens of Latah County and the Palouse region. University of Idaho Latah County Extension Plant Clinic receives over 100 requests annually for identification of plants and diagnosis of plant problems from area citizens. Many people are interested in learning in-depth information to become more effective gardeners and in order to help others; these people are the target audience for the Master Gardener program. The Master Gardener program was started by Washington State University Extension in 1973. All 50 states currently have Master Gardener programs.

Our Response

University of Idaho Latah County Extension offers a Master Gardener education program each year from January to May. The classes are held once per week for a total of 48 hours of instruction. Master Gardener students receive research-based education in horticulture and gardening on a range of topics including entomology, pesticide use, landscape design, water conservation methods, fruit tree pruning, weed iden-



Latah County Master Gardener Cohort 2015. Photo by Iris Mayes.

tification, plant diseases and how to diagnose plant problems. These courses are taught mainly by University of Idaho faculty and a few other volunteer experts. Students who complete the course and 50 hours of service within the year can become certified Master Gardeners.

UI Latah County Extension has offered a Master Gardener program since the 1980's. Since 2004, the Latah County program has educated 231 students with 179 becoming certified. Certified Master Gardeners and students provide educational programming and plant problem diagnosis. The University of Idaho Latah County Extension office relies heavily on the Master Gardeners to solve the cases turned into the plant clinic held twice weekly June through September. They host a monthly booth at the Moscow Farmer's Market for gardening outreach and education. Certified Master Gardeners also created and care for a community demonstration garden, which

was started in 2000 and has hosted numerous garden demonstration tours.

Latah County partners with UI to provide a part-time Master Gardener Coordinator, Rachel Rausch, who organizes the annual course, plant clinic and certification process. The UI Latah County Extension Educator in Small Farms and Horticulture supports the program by helping the coordinator in planning, teaching some of the classes, recruiting students and providing volunteer opportunities for the Master Gardener students. Cinda Williams sustained the program from 2008 through 2013. Iris Mayes began as Small Farms and Horticulture Educator in 2014 and continues to administer the Master Gardener program.

Program Outcomes

Master Gardener-led educational programming helps disseminate research-based education to the general gardening public. In 2015 Latah County Master Gardeners reported 1,752 hours of training and service in 2015 reaching 620 adults and 249 youth with their programs. This is typical of the annual outreach of the program. Master Gardeners have been involved in several on-going community programs with a focus on pollinators and wise water use. A few have taken on responsibilities to lead trainings on starting seedlings and growing tomatoes.

The ripple effect of positive impact from the Master Gardener program in the region is widespread. Important outcomes include an increase in environmental stewardship within the region. Knowledge of minimal and targeted use of pesticides is critical to prevent unnecessary death of pollinators and other beneficial insects that greatly contribute to overall local food production. Other pesticide hazards are likely being avoided due to increased knowledge in the community. WSU and UI regularly send their landscape maintenance crew members to the Master Gardener class.

Through a plant clinic inquiry, an exotic fruit fly, the spotted wing drosophila, new to the area in 2012, was identified by UI entomologist. In the town of Palouse, WA, certified Master Gardener Mary Estes has become a local rose expert, hosting rose workshops each summer. Local wheat farmer Jacie Jensen took the Master Gardener course and has branched into native wildflower seed production. She also continues to give educational presentations regarding her seed business and native prairie restoration. These are examples of the impact the Master Gardeners have in the community on an ongoing basis.

The Future

The demand for Master Gardener education continues to be a priority for the community with an average of 20 students registering each year. With weather shifts, an increase in

invasive species of weeds and pests are predicted. Master Gardeners are well-positioned to provide early alerts to agricultural professionals so that problems can be curtailed before they become widespread. Local food production continues to be a priority in the community and Master Gardeners are assisting by distributing resources and information to individuals wanting to grow their own food. Water conservation continues to be a priority in the Palouse region and Master Gardeners will continue to learn and help teach community members about water-saving landscaping.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Iris Mayes, Extension Educator
University of Idaho Extension, Latah County
220 E. 5th Street, Suite 325
Moscow, ID 83843
Phone: 208.883.2269
Fax: 208.882.8505
E-mail: imayes@uidaho.edu

Cinda Williams, Area Extension Educator
University of Idaho Extension
875 Perimeter Dr. MS 2338
Moscow, ID 83844-2338
Phone: 208.885.4003
Fax: 208-885-6654
E-mail: cindaw@uidaho.edu

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