

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Master Gardeners Eagerly Search For The Answers

BY SUSAN USHER

*"Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?"*

In Brunswick County, that question can spark a lot of different answers, and even more questions.

At the extreme tip of the range for many northern and southern species, Brunswick County is unique. Its known for an enormous diversity of plant and animal life. That diversity has a down side, though: an equally incredible variety of insects, invasive weeds, plant diseases and other garden no-no's.

Couple that diversity with a long growing season and the challenges of intense summer heat, mild winters, heavy annual rainfall and poor soils, and it's enough to send even the stubbornest, most independent-minded gardener asking for advice.

Luckily for all Brunswick County home gardeners, answers to most of their questions are just a phone call away.

Last Thursday volunteer Lib Duncan was staffing the hotline at the Brunswick County Agricultural Extension Center in Bolivia when someone called with a tough query. The caller's chestnut tree is bearing too many nuts this fall—four or five "baby" nuts instead of fewer, larger ones. What's the problem?

Speculating to herself that this year's intense summer feist might be part of the problem, Duncan took a number, with plans to research the issue and return the call as quickly as possible.

A resident of the Calabash area, she's one of Brunswick County's first Master Gardeners, one of 39 volunteers who underwent 30 hours of intensive training last spring with the understanding they would each provide in return at least 30 hours of volunteer work helping fellow gardeners in some fashion.

"The most interesting thing I learned was on the last day," said Bud Scrantom of Sunset Beach, president of the Brunswick County Master Gardeners. "(Extension Director) Milton Coleman told us that there are times when we should consider replacing diseased plants instead of trying to cure them."

Out of that initial group, all but two class members remain active in the program, sharing their love of "playing in the dirt" and their knowledge with fellow Brunswick County gardeners—and freeing agriculture agents to spend more time with commercial farmers.

"We've got a great group with great leadership," said David Nash, the county's extension agent for horticulture who works with the Master Gardeners program. "Some members have really given beyond the call of duty, even working on projects that are outside the scope of the Master Gardener program."

Their numbers will soon increase. Nash is leading a Master Gardener class on Bald Head Island, and a class is planned on the mainland next spring.

The hotline (253-4425) is the first of several services the Master Gardeners plan to provide. It generally operates from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. Monday through Friday, offering answers to gardening questions of all types.

Questions are as varied as you could imagine, from pumpkins that aren't producing fruit and post-storm salt damage to turf and grass problems.

"The questions vary, but eventually I think we have answered them all," said volunteer Shirley Waggoner-Eisenman of the Shallotte area. "We've sent some plants to the state lab for diagnosis and we've given out a lot of soil testing kits. Right now is the best time to do it."



MASTER GARDENER Lib Duncan takes a call on the gardening hotline as fellow volunteer Shirley Waggoner-Eisenman looks on.

*Gardening
Question?
Call the Hotline
253-4425*

A gardener all her life, Waggoner-Eisenman maintains 13 raised beds in her own backyard garden, but still finds time for volunteer work, serving as an extrajurisdictional representative on the Shallotte Planning Board and already logging 58 hours as a Master Gardener volunteer.

"It's not only a community service, but it is a learning process for the volunteers who are involved," she said. "And it takes a big load off the staff here. It frees them up."

In addition to staffing the hotline, a group of 10 to 12 Master Gardeners across the county is working with Peter Hurtle, a technician and doctoral student at N.C. State University whose studies are on mole crickets. The volunteers monitor mole cricket populations on local golf courses, use soapy water to wash them up, while Hurtle concentrates on various treatment approaches.

The Master Gardeners tried establishing a demonstration garden near the extension service center this summer, only to encounter some of the same problems gardeners run into at home: hard-to-work fill dirt and intense heat. The garden languished.

Renewing their efforts this fall, they plan to establish raised beds which will be filled with a little bit of everything: flowers, vegetables and herbs, said Waggoner-Eisenman. The goal is to install an irrigation system and also establish composting demonstrations to show others how to compost and why it's worth the effort.

"We're looking for contributions of some gardening supplies, everything from broken bags of soil that can't be sold to landscape



HORTICULTURE AGENT DAVID NASH (left) looks on as Ed Clute takes a good look at a group of ground pearls.



CAROL PHIPPS (far left) has members' full attention during a recent Master Gardeners meeting. That's President Bud Scrantom standing at the right.

timbers," she said. "Anything to do with gardening, we'd be glad to go pick it up."

At a meeting last Thursday in Bolivia the Master Gardeners spent their first few minutes together sharing news of their fall gardens (quite successful). Most stopped to take a close-up look under Nash's microscope at

"ground pearls" (a lawn-destroying pest for which there is no treatment) before moving on to ideas for the coming year for community service and public education projects.

These may include organizing one or more trips and seminars related to gardening, tagging by name trees and shrubs on the

grounds of the Brunswick County Government Center, and getting more information out to the public on the Master Gardeners hotline and other services.

Meanwhile, thanks to these eager and enthusiastic "masters," answers to local gardeners' questions are just a phone call away.

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