

Dear Prospective Master Gardener Volunteer,

Thank you for your interest in the Florida Master Gardener Volunteer Program! The [Florida Master Gardener Volunteer Program Guide](#) on pages 3-6 contains information that will be useful to you in understanding the program, as well as the role and responsibilities of a volunteer Master Gardener. It will also provide you with insight into the Florida Cooperative Extension Service, its functions, and the role of Master Gardener Volunteers within the Extension Service.

This year, we will select 20 people to participate in the Master Gardener Volunteer training program. This is a 13-week training scheduled to begin on January 6, 2026, and will take place weekly, every Tuesday from 10 am to 4:30 pm, through April 14, 2026.

Topics covered in the training include, but are not limited to:

- Botany
- Florida-Friendly Landscaping™
- Entomology
- Plant Propagation
- Plant ID
- Plant Pathology
- Soil Sciences
- Composting
- Prevention and Management of Weeds
- Nematology
- Fertilizers and Plant Nutrition
- Pesticide Safety
- Turfgrass maintenance
- Tropical Fruits
- Acarology
- Integrated Pest Management
- Vegetable Gardening
- Orchid Horticulture

The program will be taught by the Environmental Horticulture Agent, along with current Monroe County Master Gardeners and over 12 faculty guest speakers from the University of Florida.

The 2026 Master Gardener Training will alternate between in-person and online sessions on a weekly basis. In-person sessions will rotate through Upper, Middle, and Lower Keys locations. Two full-day field trips will also be included in the program.

The class fee for the 2026 Master Gardener Training is \$280.00.

**To be considered for this year's program, you must complete the following:**

- Study the attached [Florida Master Gardener Volunteer Program Guide](#)
- [Complete the application](#)
- [Select your choice of dates/times for an interview](#)
- Send a check made out to UF/IFAS Monroe County Extension for \$280 by January 6<sup>th</sup>
- *Complete your application and select your interview slot by December 8<sup>th</sup> at the latest*

I will be holding an optional Master Gardener Volunteer Training Information Session on December 5, 2025, from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m. via Zoom. Link:

<https://ufl.zoom.us/j/91294409574?pwd=MY6wI3hPkw8UztUbYYNjYk5rzMBw.1>

If you have any questions, please contact me at [Continentino-liah@monroecounty-fl.gov](mailto:Continentino-liah@monroecounty-fl.gov) or (305) 998-9580. Once your application and interview scheduling form have been submitted, I will contact you to confirm your interview time by December 9<sup>th</sup> at the latest. Thank you again for your interest. I look forward to a fantastic 2026 Master Gardener Volunteer Training!

Sincerely,

Liah Continentino

Environmental Horticulture Agent & Master Gardener Coordinator

UF/IFAS Extension, Monroe County

# Florida Master Gardener Volunteer Program Guide

This "Program Guide" contains information that will be useful to you in understanding the Master Gardener Volunteer program, as well as the role and responsibilities of a Master Gardener Volunteer. It will also provide you with insight into the Florida Cooperative Extension Service, its functions, and the role of Master Gardener Volunteers within the Extension Service.

## **Part I - History**

The rapid urban growth in many areas of the United States, coupled with increased interest in the environment and home gardening, has prompted ever-increasing numbers of homeowner questions to County Extension Service Agents. Many of these questions are seasonal in nature and can be easily answered, assuming one has horticultural training.

In 1972, an innovative Extension Service Agent in the state of Washington reasoned that well-trained volunteers could respond to many of the everyday homeowner questions, freeing him and his colleagues for more technical and difficult problems. Volunteers, such as Extension Homemakers and 4-H Leaders, had always been a part of the Extension Service, but never in the area of homeowner horticulture. The Extension Agent selected, trained, and certified volunteers as Master Gardener Volunteers and succeeded in meeting his desired objectives - in fact, they exceeded his expectations. And so, the Master Gardener Volunteer Program began.

Since that time, the Master Gardener Volunteer Program has grown and is now active in all 50 states. Florida's program began in 1979. The program has been a tremendous success and is now active in 58 of the 67 Florida counties. The Master Gardener Volunteer Program in Florida is sponsored by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), of which the Cooperative Extension Service is a part.

Just what is the Cooperative Extension Service? For a more complete understanding of this unique organization, we must go back to 1862 when the U.S. Congress passed the Morrill Act, which established colleges in each state to be financed through grants of land from the federal government. They became known as "land grant colleges," a name which persists today. These colleges would emphasize teaching practical subjects, such as agriculture and home economics. The 1887 Hatch Act provided for experimental stations at land grant colleges to conduct agricultural research.

Then, in 1914, the Smith-Lever Act created the Extension Service as a part of these colleges as a means of disseminating the practical knowledge gained through agricultural research.

The University of Florida in Gainesville is Florida's land grant college; the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is that part of the University, which has responsibility for the Cooperative Extension Service.

The term "cooperative" refers to the method by which Extension Services are funded. In Florida, three cooperating tax sources provide funds: The U.S. Department of Agriculture, the State through legislative appropriations, and the counties through appropriations by county governments. The word "cooperative" also implies a sharing of information generated through sound research programs at the federal and state levels.

The term "extension" defines this organization's purpose - to extend the information generated at the state and federal level to people at the county level in the form of a "service." The Cooperative Extension Service is an informal educational organization that provides information in three (3) main areas: Agriculture, Home Economics, and 4-H Youth. Community Development, Marine Biology, and Energy are associated programs.

The motto and goal of the Cooperative Extension Service is "Helping People Help Themselves." Thus, you can see how well the Master Gardener Volunteer concept fits into the ultimate objectives and goals of the Extension Service.

## **Part II - The Master Gardener Volunteer Program**

Selection to become a candidate for the Master Gardener Volunteer Program is not based on prior training, education, knowledge, or experience. All candidates will be considered regardless of race, creed, gender, or national origin.

A sincere desire to help others, a desire to learn, and a personal commitment to volunteer service are the major selection criteria involved. *Gardening experience and knowledge are always helpful, but they are by no means a requirement for selection for the Master Gardener Volunteer Program.*

## **Part III - Master Gardener Volunteer Training**

Subjects to be covered include basic botany, nematology, entomology, pathology, pest control, turf grasses, soils and fertilizers, vegetable gardening, pesticide safety, plant propagation, fruits, woody ornamentals, plant identification and usage, and integrated pest management.

The fee for each trainee covers reference materials from the University of Florida. These materials are updated frequently so that Master Gardener Volunteers always provide the most current recommendations approved by the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Florida.

Master Gardener Volunteers deal only with homeowner-type questions. The Extension Agents will respond to all questions or problems from commercial or professional growers.

At the conclusion of the training period, all Master Gardener Volunteers are required to take a comprehensive examination on the materials covered and receive a **passing grade of 70%**. Upon achieving a passing grade and completing 75 hours of volunteer service in the first year, the candidate can be awarded the title of UF/IFAS Master Gardener Volunteer.

Once certified, Master Gardener Volunteers must abide by policies set out by IFAS and their County Extension Agents.

#### **Part IV - Master Gardener Volunteer Activities**

For new Master Gardener Volunteers, volunteer activities begin following course completion. **Seventy-five (75) hours** of volunteer service are required in the first year and **35 hours** of service each year after that in order to remain active. (Depending on need, some counties may require more.) All Master Gardener Volunteers also have to attend **ten (10)** hours of approved training each year to maintain active status.

Master Gardener Volunteers provide their hours of volunteer time in many ways. Here is a listing of some of the ways volunteer hours have been returned: answering telephone calls, running mobile plant clinics, assisting with social media, writing newsletter or newspaper columns and fact sheets, making home problem-solving visits, assisting in extension programming, working in community and demonstration gardens, preparing and delivering presentations or workshops, working with the Youth Gardening programs in elementary schools and judging horticultural contests.

As the Master Gardener Volunteers assist the Extension Agents, they are in effect "extending the Extension Service." As such, they provide advice and recommendations that have been well-documented as a result of experimentation and testing and are approved by the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the **University of Florida**.

Training never ceases for the active Master Gardener Volunteer. Regular, ongoing training sessions provide Master Gardener Volunteers with the opportunity to gain additional, timely gardening information.

Every year, an advanced training is held and opened up to Master Gardener Volunteers in various counties. The UF/IFAS State Master Gardener Volunteer Program offers a 3-day conference every other year. In the off-year, a day-long program is offered in various regions. These advanced sessions provide in-depth information on gardening subjects and are presented by State Extension specialists, agents, and other authorities. It is an

excellent opportunity for Master Gardener Volunteers to look into the future of horticultural research at IFAS.

### **Guidelines Regarding Re-Certification**

A Master Gardener Volunteer may recertify for participation in the program for another year by:

- (1) Successfully completing the initial seventy-five (75) hours of volunteer service and adhering to the policies set forth in the agreement letter
- (2) Committing to the county annual hour requirement of volunteer work to be completed in the subsequent year(s)
- (3) Completing ten (10) hours of additional horticulture training each year. Examples of this are: Master Gardener Volunteers webinar series, Master Gardener Volunteer Advanced Training in Gainesville, one-on-one training, university or community college related coursework, horticulture seminars at the County Extension Office, etc. If in doubt, check with the Extension Agent to see if the training is acceptable.

### **Inactive Status**

An inactive Master Gardener Volunteer is one who is unable to commit to an additional thirty-five (35+) hours in a subsequent year but would like the opportunity to possibly recertify him/herself in the future. The following policies apply:

- (1) An inactive Master Gardener Volunteer is one who is in good standing and has completed his/her original commitment of seventy-five (75) hours of volunteer service.
- (2) Inactive Master Gardener Volunteers are ineligible for Master Gardener Volunteer Advanced Training in Gainesville, mailings, or Master Gardener Volunteer educational meetings.