



Illinois Master Gardener

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Illinois
Extension





Candice Anderson
State Specialist

A Message from the State Coordinator

As we reflect on the past year, I want to begin with my sincere thank you for the extraordinary contributions of University of Illinois Extension Master Gardeners across the state in 2025. Your dedication continues to make a meaningful difference in communities large and small.

We are proud to share the remarkable achievements and growth of our volunteers over the past year. From nurturing community gardens to leading educational workshops and outreach efforts, Master Gardeners have inspired a love of gardening, advanced sustainable practices, and expanded access to reliable, research-based information throughout Illinois.

This year was especially meaningful as we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Illinois Extension Master Gardener program. Regional celebrations were held across the state, culminating in a memorable gathering at the State Master Gardener Conference in September, hosted by volunteers from Sangamon, Logan, and Menard counties.

More than 300 volunteers came together to learn, connect, and celebrate — a powerful reminder of the countless lives this program has touched over the past five decades.

Thank you for your continued commitment to our mission of “Helping Others Learn to Grow.” It is truly an honor to work alongside such passionate volunteers and dedicated Extension staff. Together, we celebrate our past, strengthen our present, and look forward with excitement to the next 50 years.

Candice Anderson,
State Master Gardener Specialist
(217) 300-3198
mille116@illinois.edu





What is an Illinois Extension Master Gardener?

Illinois Extension Master Gardeners apply science-based gardening knowledge provided by university experts to support community gardening needs. In 2025, 2,048 Master Gardener volunteers dedicated 153,653 hours of their time to the Master Gardener mission of Helping Others Learn to Grow. The program continues to expand access by training 649 new individuals interested in learning about gardening.

Volunteer Type	Hours
Community Science	2,358
Direct General Education	16,858
Direct Youth Education	5,204
Extension Supported Gardens	45,015
Indirect Outreach And Education	4,077
Information Services	10,517
Program Support	18,283
Stewardship	1,887

2025 Data Points



2,048
Master Gardener
Volunteers



Training Participants

- 535 Online Trainees
- 114 Hybrid Trainees



122,730
Hours Volunteered

- Continuing Education Hours: 25,720
- Volunteer Hours: 123,972



\$5,268,755
Value



go.illinois.edu/MGimpact



Master Gardener 50th Anniversary Celebration

In 2025, University of Illinois Extension Master Gardeners celebrated 50 years of positive impact across Illinois. About 300 Master Gardener volunteers gathered in Springfield to forge connections and celebrate half a century of helping others learn to grow at the 2025 annual conference. What began in 1975 as a grassroots initiative has flourished into a legacy rooted in education, environmental stewardship, and the development of impactful community gardening projects.

To celebrate, Extension staff introduced intensive learning experiences that combined educational presentations with hands-on learning. During these super seminars, they dug deep into topics such as native landscape design, tree care, soil health, bonsai cultivation, insect identification, and education on engaging youth gardening.

“Fifty years ago, this program took root with a solution-forward mission to ‘help others learn to grow,’” said Candice Anderson, state Master Gardener specialist. “Since then, our volunteers have grown more than gardens. They have grown through connections, established partnerships, and positively impacted their communities. This conference was a celebration of everything they have nurtured over the years.”

Master Gardeners were recognized for team projects, exemplary impact by outstanding volunteers, and years of service. Connections grew through stories from past volunteers and staff, and new ideas were planted to bloom throughout the next 50 years.





Statewide Teamwork Award Features

Outstanding team achievements create positive community impact

The annual teamwork awards highlight Master Gardener projects that positively impact communities, use new innovative gardening skills, and inspire other volunteers to implement more education within their projects.

These projects are evaluated based on goals that showcase educational content and demonstrate impact, innovation, and the ability to be replicated by other local Master Gardener teams.

Boone County NASR in the Gardens

The Boone County Master Gardeners created lessons to share with the Northland Association for Special Recreation (NASR) program participants. NASR is a cooperative partnership with the Belvidere Park District that provides programming for individuals with disabilities and related special needs. This programming involved life skills and hands-on lessons on nature and gardening.



Chicago, Cook County

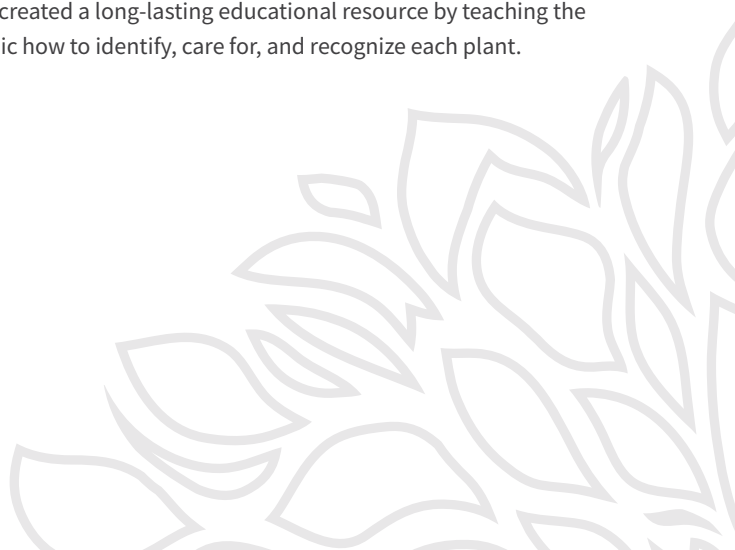
Restoring History through Horticulture at Chicago's Finest Marina

This project transforms Chicago's Finest Marina into a living historical exhibit, restoring native plant life that freedom seekers would have encountered on the Underground Railroad to offer the public a visual and educational understanding of this pivotal era. Launched in 2022, it's a collaborative effort involving Master Gardeners, historical organizations, and students from Southside Occupational Academy, who are actively propagating native seeds. Through Master Gardeners creating relationships, this project continues to advocate for the history of the Ton Farm, a crucial Underground Railroad site, and provides meaningful educational experiences. It aims to inspire a love for gardening and nature while providing valuable educational opportunities for home-schooled students in the community.

Edgar County

Schwartz Park Project

The Edgar County Master Gardeners have demonstrated exceptional dedication to the Schwartz Park Project through collaborative leadership, countless volunteer hours, and a shared passion for horticulture education. Working together, volunteers have removed weeds, invasive plants, and dead limbs, and created and installed educational plant identification signs. These actions have beautified a beloved public space and created a long-lasting educational resource by teaching the public how to identify, care for, and recognize each plant.



Jackson County

Reviving Heritage Through Growing Flax at the Demonstration Garden

In a dynamic collaboration exemplifying the spirit of teamwork, the Harrison-Bruce Historical Village Master Gardener team, working on the campus of John A. Logan College, revitalized a historic demonstration garden with a unique focus on growing flax — a historically significant yet often overlooked crop. The project began with a simple yet powerful question: Could we grow flax as early settlers had done in the 1800s in a changing climate? The gardeners and staff also partnered with local fiber guilds, whose members provided expert guidance on traditional flax processing techniques and uses and led flax fiber processing and spinning demonstrations, deepening the educational impact of the project. The project aimed to blend education, preservation, and sustainability while honoring past agricultural practices.



Peoria County

Wildlife Prairie Park Kim St. John Butterfly Habitat

Watch a child's face light up as they enter a hoop house of fluttering butterflies, discover a chrysalis, watch a butterfly lay its eggs, or a caterpillar crawl across the ground in front of them. Adults delight in the host plants in the hoop house and pollinator plots surrounding the outside area. This is the magic of the Wildlife Prairie Kim St. John Butterfly Habitat, a popular part of the park maintained by Master Gardeners in the area.

Know More Grow More Grant Highlights

Funding for community garden projects inspires community growth

The Know More Grow More grants provide supplemental funding to local Illinois Extension Master Gardener programs. These funds cover materials and supplies needed to start or expand community projects. The funding is generated through a silent auction, the State Master Gardener program budget, and contributions from sponsors such as the 4-H Foundation. Recipients of this grant are carefully evaluated and selected by the State Master Gardener Advisory Committee, the State Master Gardener Specialist, and the State 4-H representative. Each recipient must report on project goals, achievements, evaluations, and overall impact.

Lake County

Seed Library Native Seed Expansion

In 2025, Lake County Extension hosted five native plant webinars, reaching 615 participants, and conducted five in-person seed-starting workshops that served nearly 100 individuals. Webinar topics included native plant propagation, landscaping with native species, supporting moths, and a Spanish-language introduction to native plants.

Master Gardener volunteers collected seed from 57 native plant species. By the 2026 Seed Expo, these efforts are expected to yield approximately 7,000–9,000 seed packets for distribution.



Coles County

Jr. Master Gardener Garden Irrigation

In partnership with the Extension Master Gardener program, the Charleston High School Agriculture program implemented three seasonal gardening programs. During the fall, students focused on activities such as seed collection and sorting, calculating germination rates, and tracking the pounds of produce harvested. Winter programming emphasized science through hands-on exploration of plant life cycles, while spring and summer featured “Read and Weed” sessions combining literacy development with garden stewardship.

Through a collaborative Farm-to-Table experience, community connections were strengthened. Students harvested produce and brought it to the local farmers’ market, where they collected donations, shared information about the school garden, and practiced communication and leadership skills. Student leadership was further cultivated through Teen Reach, where teens mentored younger students and helped them care for the garden. The most significant outcome was the installation of the automatic irrigation system, which transformed day-to-day garden operations by reducing the time staff and volunteers must spend on manual watering. The system frees up valuable hours for student engagement, instructional activities, and deeper integration of the garden into the school’s curriculum.

White County

Improving and Updating White County 4-H GIFT Garden

With several hunger initiatives already in existence in this county, the project worked with each one to help meet local needs. With the help of the SNAP-Ed program, all produce grown in the garden was donated to each of the initiatives through local food pantries and two senior centers in White County. To extend the benefits of fresh produce to community members stopping by the pantries, SNAP-Ed staff provided taste tests, handed out recipe cards, and educated pantry volunteers on the different ways to store and prepare the produce.



Learn more about the Master Gardener 50th Anniversary at go.illinois.edu/MG50.



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