University of Illinois Extension
Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

November Snapshots

2026

Local Master Gardeners earn state recognition for service and impact

Master Gardener volunteers help strengthen communities across central Illinois through education, local food production, conservation, and community partnerships. Their work supports youth and adult learning, improves public spaces, expands access to fresh produce, and connects residents with research-based gardening information. This year, volunteers and project teams from Fulton, Peoria, and Tazewell counties received state recognition for their outstanding service and leadership.

Outstanding Master Gardener Awards

The Outstanding Master Gardener Award recognizes volunteers who demonstrate exceptional service, leadership, and commitment to Extension's mission.

- Annie Link, West Peoria, Master Gardener information booths at Peoria Riverfront Market and Ignite Peoria
- Gloria Sun, Dunlap, Wildlife Prairie Park 4-H Learning Garden and Peoria Zoo pollinator garden
- Mary Peifer, Peoria, Luthy Botanical Garden and Peoria Friendship House community garden.
- Laurie Swanke, Washington, Morton Giving Garden

Sustained Excellence Awards

The Sustained Excellence Award honors volunteers who continue to make significant contributions after receiving the Outstanding Master Gardener Award.

For nearly 20 years, Susan Walters from Canton, has helped lead horticulture education and community improvement projects. Her service includes Gardeners BIG Day, pollinator education, public garden projects, and community beautification efforts.

Ellen Denler, Pekin, was honored for her ongoing work in conservation, native plants, ecological gardening, and youth education. She has been a leader in Conservation@Home and other efforts that help residents create landscapes that support pollinators, wildlife, and healthy ecosystems.

Teamwork Awards

The Peoria Friendship House Community Garden was recognized for transforming an abandoned urban garden space into a thriving community resource.

The Morton Giving Garden was awarded for the successful relocation and expansion of its food donation garden.

Enjoy the full story on ILRiverHort blog.



Master Gardeners honored at this year's state conference included Laurie Swanke, Paulette Hoyle, Annie LInk, Mary Peifer, Jaime Dooley, Susan Walters. Not pictured includes Gloria Sun, Ellen Denler and many who were part of the team awards.

Photo by Ainsley Olsen, Illinois Extension

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