



Illinois Master Gardener

2024 ANNUAL REPORT





Candice Anderson
State Specialist

A Message from the State Coordinator

Looking back at another year, I first want to thank you for all the fantastic work that University of Illinois Extension Master Gardeners contributed to their communities in 2024!

We are thrilled to share more about our dedicated volunteers' remarkable achievements and growth over the past year. From community gardens to educational workshops, our Master Gardeners have significantly impacted Illinois, fostering a love for gardening and promoting sustainable practices.

A few highlights from 2024:

- The State Master Gardener Conference was hosted by Champaign, Vermilion, and Ford-Iroquois county volunteers, with 300 attending volunteers eager to learn and network.
- Several great informational webinars on topics like the periodical cicada emergence of 2024 were presented by our Illinois Extension experts as continuing education opportunities for Master Gardener volunteers.

- A new Extension-wide volunteer management system was released. Volunteers have demonstrated patience and willingness to learn with us through this new system.
- We continued the process of making key content updates to our Master Gardener manual.
- We kicked off plans for the 50th anniversary celebration of the Illinois Master Gardener program in 2025.
- The state team welcomed new marketing and communications staff to help us share more about the impact Master Gardeners are making across the state.
- Thank you for your continued support and commitment to our mission of "Helping Others Learn to Grow!" I am honored every day to work with such wonderful volunteers and dedicated Extension staff.

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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 2024 the 2,212 Master Gardener volunteers dedicated 153,864 hours of their time to the Master Gardener mission of Helping Others Learn to Grow. The program continues to nurture its initiative to increase participation accessibility by welcoming 658 newly trained volunteers.



123,972
Volunteer
Hours



25,720
Continuing
Education



4,172
Other



153,864
Total Hours
Contributed

2024 Engagement



2,212
Master Gardener
Volunteers



658
New Volunteers

- 544 trained online
- 114 hybrid training



89
Volunteer full-time
employee equivalents

| Volunteer Type | Hours |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| Citizen science | 2,241 |
| Direct general education | 17,627 |
| Direct youth education | 5,230 |
| Extension supported gardens | 53,951 |
| Indirect outreach and education | 4,739 |
| Information services | 12,730 |
| Program support | 19,829 |
| Stewardship | 2,571 |



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\$5,393,778
Value



Teamwork Awards

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 for goals that showcase educational content and demonstrate impact, innovation, and the ability to be replicated by other local Master Gardener teams.

Boone County

Grow Your Own Food and More Speakers Bureau

The Boone County Master Gardeners recognized the need for more horticulture programming in the community. They developed a garden series called Grow Your Own Food that was pieced out to other local organizations, which allowed them to share their programs multiple times. They also used Speakers Bureau lessons to present on several topics. This group of volunteers took the educational focus of the Master Gardener program to heart by providing 25 lessons to the community and making connections along the way.

Champaign County

The Vegetable Section of the Idea Garden

The Vegetable Section of the Idea Garden demonstrates ideas for garden design and maintenance with vertical gardening, provides an inclusive learning environment and promotes environmentally responsible gardening practices. This team aims to educate the public as well as other Master Gardeners. Their signage with QR codes helps educate visitors. In addition, the team donates over 500 pounds of produce to local food pantries. Coles County Youth Gardening Home School.

The Youth Gardening program has been an asset to the Master Gardener program for many years. It has recently expanded its outreach efforts by focusing on home-schooled students to ensure they have access to horticultural and nature-based education. The program provided monthly interactive educational programming to 50 homeschooled students in two groups: The Young Explorers and the Good Seeds. Each month, the Youth Gardening Group develops an engaging curriculum tailored to students from preschool to elementary school. By fostering curiosity and hands-on learning experiences, the program aims to inspire a love for gardening and nature while providing valuable educational opportunities for home-schooled students in the community.





Peoria County

St. Ann's Garden of Hope

This team helped harvest and supply 15,452 pounds of food for five food pantries located in some of the most food-insecure areas in Peoria County. Each week, members of the team visited the St. Ann's Garden of Hope to plant, weed, water, harvest, and share joy in their southside community. Because of the team's efforts, families enjoy food from spring through fall, including fresh fruits and vegetables locally grown at the Garden of Hope.

Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties

Conservation@Home West Central Illinois

The Conservation@Home team used its first year to quickly improve conservation efforts in all four counties and beyond. United in their goals to improve biodiversity, the team continues to be successful in changing the perspectives and land-management practices of community members. By recognizing the environmental benefits that result from choices made by homeowners in their gardens and landscapes, the Conservation@Home team reinforces its mission of illustrating the role people have in influencing the patterns and evolution of their environments.

Know More Grow More Grant Awards

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, along with 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

Chapel CARE Garden

Feeding over 400 families a week from one garden alleviates the pressure of limited food sources. However, with pesky diseases lurking about, zucchini crop yields became more challenging to maintain for The Chapel CARE Garden in Libertyville. This garden spans half an acre, where Master Gardeners grow about 14,000 pounds of produce annually, including tomatoes, peppers, tomatillos, zucchini, cucumbers, winter squash, beans, onions, and radishes. Since 2011, Lake County Master Gardeners have volunteered to manage the garden three times a week during the growing season.

In 2021, gardeners noticed a decline in zucchini harvest due to powdery mildew and zucchini yellow mosaic virus. By 2023, most plants were affected by the diseases. To manage the issue, Master Gardeners prepared an experiment to plant disease-resistant zucchini cultivars. Their grant application requested funds for disease-resistant zucchini seeds, materials to build raised gardening beds, and long-handled gardening tools to spread mulch to test their theory. They planted Dunja and Green Machine zucchini cultivars, both resistant to their most common disease invaders, while keeping one control variant that was not disease-resistant. Their findings showed that Dunja was the more productive option.

They also planted Kodiak Brown Mighty Mustard as an organic way to reduce soil-borne diseases, applied crop rotation, and set up cucumber beetle traps for pest control. These efforts improved the harvest quality and increased duration from 9 to 14 weeks.





DeKalb County Each One Teach One Garden

In a community where families face the daily challenge of food insecurity, Master Gardeners connected with students and other community members to transform an empty space into a thriving garden. Through regenerative gardening, solar technology, and mentorship, students gained skills while positively impacting the community.

In 2022, Master Gardeners and St. Paul's Episcopal Church became a laboratory site for Northern Illinois University's Institute for the Study of the Environment, Sustainability, and Energy program in Food Justice and Sustainable Food Systems. The site was set up to teach regenerative gardening and to be a model for other organizations concerned about food insecurity in DeKalb County.

In 2024, five program students began an internship at the garden, where they were mentored by Master Gardeners on gardening skills, food safety, and leadership to instruct other student volunteers. One notable project during the internship was the construction of a 10x15-foot wind tunnel greenhouse with a solar-powered watering system. The greenhouse grew kale, carrots, radishes, and lettuce. Unfortunately, 50mph winds dismantled the cover. The team reattached the cover and used frost cloth to help preserve the vegetables during the cooler months.

Students analyzed the use of these systems to grow more produce for local food pantries by weighing and recording their findings. Students then packaged, delivered, and distributed produce to a local food pantry. They plan to implement more regenerative practices, such as installing an irrigation system and improving sustainability by using recycled windows and other affordable supplies to build cold frames. Over the growing season, 130 college students volunteered at least two hours each, contributing to 1,803 pounds of donated vegetables.

Madison County Open Gate Garden Pollinator Education

The alluring aroma and array of attractive colors create a native plant buffet for local pollinators at the Open Gate Garden of Madison County. Through thoughtful planning, Master Gardeners educated the public on the vital relationship between native plants and pollinators. Educational signs were installed in high-traffic areas throughout the garden, inspiring visitors to engage and learn about its offerings. After the signs were placed, Master Gardeners held an open house to feature the new additions, and over 20 visitors walked the garden that day.

The new signage informed community members about the types of native plants and pollinators that commonly visit them, emphasizing their essential role in our ecosystem. Visitors reported having a deepened knowledge of pollinators and the importance of incorporating native plants in their landscapes. Volunteers have also received more questions and conversations about pollinators from garden visitors.





Marshall and Putnam Counties Learn Grow Share

Through a series of workshops, Master Gardeners partnered with 4-H to get youth involved in the garden. The Junior Master Gardener Spin Club is a collaborative program between Master Gardeners and 4-H. As part of the Junior Master Gardener Spin Club, 10 youths were educated on different gardening topics, including seed starting, soil quality and structure, composting, disease and insect identification and prevention, and floral design.



Master Gardeners engaged youth in hands-on learning experiences throughout the gardening season. Activities included building a compost box using earthworms to decompose organic materials, collecting soil samples for testing, companion planting, and monitoring pests and diseases to promote plant health. Their new gardening skills were then applied across programs.

The youth collected flowers they had the opportunity to grow and put together a floral bouquet display for the local 4-H show. In addition, they demonstrated the nutritional value of the vegetables they grew by creating salsa at the 4-H show. They also prepared zucchini muffins in collaboration with members of the Saratoga Leadaways 4-H Club. These children learned the importance of gardening, developed valuable skills, displayed what they learned to peers, and enriched the community. Throughout the season, 90% of their harvest was donated to the community on a weekly basis through a self-standing food library at the Henry United Church.





Champaign County

The Master Gardener annual conference inspires growth

In a vibrant pollinator garden, gentle wafts of native blooms fill the air, singing an attractive melody to pollinators. At the 2024 Illinois Extension Master Gardener state conference, keynote speaker and Extension Horticulture Educator Ryan Panku covered how to incorporate native plants in home landscapes and discussed the vital relationship between pollinators and native plants.

In Champaign, 300 energized volunteers gathered to learn and grow their gardening skills. Volunteers enjoyed tours to community gardens and breakout sessions on crucial garden topics like soil lead in urban gardens, planting diverse trees, climate-conscious projects, and invasive species. The Master Gardeners also celebrated project impacts through awards and volunteer recognition.

Master Gardener 50th Anniversary Celebration

In 2025, University of Illinois Extension Master Gardeners are celebrating 50 years of positive impact across Illinois. With a legacy rooted in education, environmental stewardship, and the development of impactful gardening projects, Master Gardeners remain committed to helping others learn to grow.

In preparation for this golden milestone, regional events across the state will provide local opportunities for community members to participate in gardening activities. These events will include seminars, garden tours, and hands-on gardening activities.



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



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