



2026 National Extension Master Gardener Coordinator Conference

Navigating New Horizons:
Master Gardener Programs in a Changing World

The Wade Hotel, 644 N. Lakeshore Drive, Chicago



Extension
Master Gardener

Tuesday, Aug. 18

8-8:30 a.m.

Full-day bus tour loads up at hotel entrance

Noon-12:30 p.m.

Half-day tour loads up at hotel entrance

4:30 p.m.

Full-day bus tour returns

5:30 p.m.

Half-day tour returns

5-7 p.m.

Registration table open, Great Room 1 & 2 - 6th Floor

5:30-7 p.m.

**Welcome social gathering and poster session,
Great Room 1 & 2 - 6th Floor**

Wednesday, Aug. 19

Altitude Room, 33rd floor

7:30 a.m.-noon

Registration table open. Altitude Room, 33rd floor

8:30-9 a.m.

Welcome, housekeeping, 2028 NEMGCC announcement

9-9:50 a.m.

**Leading Change at Scale: Keeping Volunteers
Engaged Through Organizational Transformation**

Amanda Taylor, Associate Director, Workforce

Development, University of Illinois Extension;

Ramona Girtman, Volunteer Management System

Associate, Workforce Development, University of Illinois

Extension; **Sheila Powers**, Volunteer Relations Associate,

Workforce Development, University of Illinois Extension

Master Gardener programs nationwide are navigating rapid changes in technology and processes, from new reporting systems to evolving screening requirements. While these shifts strengthen accountability, they often introduce confusion, resistance, and the risk of volunteer disengagement if not managed at the organizational level.

When University of Illinois Extension launched a centralized volunteer management system serving thousands statewide, the challenge was not just implementation; it was leading change at scale. Success required more than training; it demanded leadership alignment, clear communication, and intentional support for both staff and volunteers. The central question became: how do organizations implement complex change without losing the people who power their programs?

This interactive session shares real-world lessons from a statewide rollout, focusing on strategies that moved beyond compliance to build trust and buy-in. Presenters will highlight approaches to aligning leadership, equipping staff as change leaders, and creating support systems that meet volunteers where they are.

Participants will leave with practical, adaptable tools to lead system-wide change, while strengthening engagement, reducing resistance, and sustaining the volunteer-driven mission at the heart of Extension.

9:50-10:40 a.m.

**Clicking with Volunteers: Advocating for Volunteers’
Technological Needs**

Leslie Madsen, State Extension Master Gardener

Coordinator, Oregon State University; **Debi Kelly**,

State Extension Master Gardener Coordinator,

University of Missouri

No one becomes a Master Gardener volunteer because they’re eager to engage with databases, yet our universities increasingly expect volunteers to exhibit the same level of technological proficiency as their employees. In this workshop, we will briefly share our experiences navigating the intersection of university technology mandates and volunteers’ discomfort with, or refusal to use, these systems.

We will then dive into a problem-solving session that touches on how universities decide which software to adopt, what software-vetting processes you should insist on, and how to advocate for volunteers by helping university HR and IT departments understand how volunteers’ perspectives and tech support needs differ from those of employees and students. We’ll crowdsource ideas for approaching such challenges as computer access, information security concerns, religious objections to technology use, and the who, what, where, when, and how of volunteer tech support.

10:40-11 a.m. BREAK

11-11:50 a.m.

**Leveraging Volunteers to Deliver a Native Landscape
Design Workshop**

Gemini Bhalsod, Horticulture Educator, University of

Illinois Extension; **Nancy Kreith**, Horticulture Educator,

University of Illinois Extension; **Karla Griesbaum**,

Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy Educator,

University of Illinois Extension; **Ryan Pankau**,

Horticulture Educator, University of Illinois Extension

This interactive session highlights how Extension can leverage Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists to deliver an innovative series of native landscape design workshops. Offered by University of Illinois Extension for nearly a decade, native design workshops have grown into one of our most popular offerings at field offices around the state.

These two-part workshops begin with an introductory lecture led by Extension educators, followed by case studies presented by experienced volunteers. Participants then receive individualized coaching to develop a customized native landscape design for their home or community project, supported by a guided homework process. Workshops have been offered both online and in person to reach diverse audiences.

Presenters will share strategies for delivering this program in person and virtually, including volunteer training and mentorship. Attendees will learn practical techniques for coaching participants through hand-drawn landscape designs using drafting tools and rulers. The session will also explore transitioning this hands-on program to online platforms such as Moodle and Zoom for collecting assignments, sharing sketches, and collaborating digitally.

Our presentation walks through the program development from customized registration forms and volunteer pairing to virtual facilitation and evaluation, offering a replicable model to expand program capacity while meeting growing interest in native plant landscapes.

Noon-1 p.m. Luncheon Buffet- Great Room 1 & 2- 6th Floor

1-1:50 p.m.

**What’s Your Garden Future? A New Way to Engage
Communities on Climate Change**

LeAnn Locher, State Extension Master Gardener

Outreach Coordinator, Oregon State University;

Brooke Edmunds, Local/County Extension Master

Gardener Coordinator, Oregon State University

Garden Future is a statewide Master Gardener-led initiative that reimagines how Extension programs engage the public around climate change by centering conversation, creativity, and community knowledge alongside research-based education. In this session, Oregon State University Extension faculty will share how Garden Future combines volunteer activation, public engagement, and real-time data collection into a single, integrated program model that is producing measurable impact.

Rather than relying on one-way information delivery, Garden Future equips Master Gardener volunteers to facilitate meaningful, place-based conversations with gardeners about how climate change is already showing up in their gardens and what adaptations they are making. These conversations generate qualitative and quantitative data through a simple three-question survey, which is analyzed and rapidly shared with volunteers, faculty, and the public via newsletters, videos, and educational resources, creating a continuous feedback loop between Extension and community experience.

Participants will learn how this model strengthens volunteer confidence, expands Extension’s reach, surfaces emerging educational needs in real time, and builds trust around a complex and often difficult topic. The session will highlight program design, training approaches, creative engagement tools, and lessons learned, offering a flexible framework that other Master Gardener programs can adapt to their own regional contexts.

2-2:30 p.m.

**Beyond Bob Dylan: The Times Have Changed in Our
Local Master Gardener Volunteer Program**

Terry Straub, County Extension Educator, University of

Minnesota; **Rachel Kimpton**, Local/County Extension

Master Gardener Coordinator, University of Minnesota

The times — they have changed! The number of Master Gardener volunteers in our local program has doubled since 2019. There are now over 1,100 individuals who call themselves Master Gardener volunteers in Hennepin County, Minnesota. We are engaging non-traditional volunteers, including younger folks, immigrants, and people with limited gardening experience. Master Gardener volunteers have moved beyond traditional volunteer roles, such as responding to a local food desert created by riots following the murder of George Floyd and helping neighbors during the recent Operation Metro Surge. Having many volunteers has brought many opportunities and challenges. Learn how we’ve put the phrase “Extension is for Everyone” to work at the local level.

2:30-3 p.m.

**Leveraging Existing Extension Programs to Build
Intergenerational Learning Models**

Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle, Horticulture Educator,

University of Illinois Extension; **Ainsley Olsen**, Program

Coordinator, University of Illinois Extension

Discover how Master Gardener programs can evolve into intergenerational experiences that expand audience reach and build stronger community connections. This session shares Seeds of a Nation, a program that brings together adult learning, youth activities, and volunteer-led outreach in a simple, flexible way.

Participants will learn how we created easy-to-use program kits, supported volunteers in leading programs, and used existing systems to offer programs to libraries, schools, and community groups. Real examples and practical tips will help you adapt this approach to fit your own programs and community needs. If you’re looking for a way to make the most of what you already have while expanding your impact, this session will give you ideas to get started.

3-3:30 p.m. BREAK



3:30-4 p.m.

Volunteer Training in Plant Diagnostics

David Lowenstein, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Michigan State University; **Becca Krans**, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Michigan State University

Michigan State University’s Lawn and Garden Hotline and Ask Extension provide Michiganders with answers to issues related to trees, lawns, flowers, insect pests, and more. The consumer horticulture team is responsible for all plant-related education and outreach and handles over 6,000 plant-related inquiries annually on Hotline and Ask Extension. This is only possible due to a team of trained Extension Master Gardener volunteers who aid in plant diagnostics. These volunteers aid gardeners who grow food and flowers for themselves and their communities and provide the information to make environmentally-responsible decisions. This presentation highlights the Diagnostic Academy, our multi-day training that equips volunteers with the tools to assist urban and suburban gardeners, and efforts to keep these volunteers engaged. We standardized volunteer training statewide with interactive activities and lessons for the last five years. We will discuss the formats of multi-session and hybrid options used across seven previous trainings. This presentation highlights the personalized training efforts to expand staff capacity in gardening education and the successes and challenges of maintaining volunteers who help with diagnostic response.

4-4:15 p.m.

Extension Master Gardeners in Community Science: Introducing Sweet Potatoes as a New Crop for Western Washington

Laurel Moulton, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Washington State University

Extension Master Gardener volunteers joined local farmers to host sweet potato trials in western Washington and evaluated educational resources being created for the unique maritime climate of the Pacific Northwest. Between 2023 and 2025, more than 30 gardeners, in addition to 61 farmers, gave researchers feedback on their experiences propagating and growing sweet potatoes in their gardens. In the winter of 2026, Master Gardener volunteers served as editors of both the growing guide, Growing sweet potatoes in Western Washington, and the short instructional videos that resulted from the research to make sure that they were accessible to home gardeners and provided the information needed to be successful growing sweet potatoes in Pacific Northwest home gardens.

Funding from a Professional Development Grant covered a portion of the Master Gardener Coordinator’s salary and facilitated the publication of educational materials that were suitable for farmers and gardeners in the Pacific Northwest region. Volunteers received education and helped create resources to keep them on the cutting edge of a new crop in this unique region.

4:15-4:30 p.m.

Beyond Recognition: Using Seasonal Social Connection to Sustain Master Gardener Volunteer Engagement

Clarissa Chairez, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, University of Florida

Retention is a persistent challenge in volunteer-driven Extension programs. While formal recognition is standard, volunteers often experience burnout or disconnection due to service hour pressures. This project evaluated whether structured team-building activities could increase a sense of belonging and support long-term engagement within a Master Gardener Volunteer program.

From 2023 to 2025, three annual winter team-building events were implemented. Activities focused on low-pressure social interaction and mental wellness, including collaborative games, horticultural art (wreath making and kokedama), and facilitated recaps of collective program impacts. Evaluation data were collected through annual end-of-year surveys and participation records. Across three years, 97% of participating volunteers reported an increased sense of community belonging and/or improved mental wellness. Attendees demonstrated higher continued participation rates than non-participants.

Based on these results, the program is expanding in 2026 to include summer workshops and quarterly “reconnection” sessions specifically for recent graduates to mitigate first-year attrition. These findings suggest that intentional, low-cost social opportunities are a high-impact strategy for fostering resilient volunteer communities and reducing silent departures related to service requirements.

4:30-4:45 p.m.

Growing Expertise: Boosting Master Gardener Plant Diagnostic Skills

Heather Kalaman, Horticulture Extension Agent, University of Florida; **Clarissa Chairez**, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, University of Florida

The UF/IFAS Extension Plant Clinics provide critical support to gardeners statewide, serving thousands of clients each year through the expertise of Master Gardener volunteers. To ensure high-quality diagnostic support, a needs assessment was conducted with 144 volunteers to assess interest, confidence, and knowledge in plant triage, pest, and disease identification, and other diagnostic topics. Results indicated low confidence in identifying pests (21%) and diseases (27%), with strong interest in improving plant diagnostic (97%) and pest management skills (95%). Specifically, respondents expressed high demand for additional training in diagnosing pests (94%), diseases (98%), and abiotic disorders (92%). Consequently, a three-hour diagnostic training workshop was developed and delivered to 95 volunteers across three counties, focused on various plant diagnostic topics. Post-workshop evaluations showed substantial gains in knowledge and confidence: 95% reported increased confidence in plant clinic work or diagnostic advising, 82% could distinguish pathogenic signs from symptoms, and 84% of pathogens and 95% of insect pests presented were correctly identified. Awareness of research-based diagnostic resources increased to 95–98% across plant health categories. Overall, the workshop significantly strengthened volunteer diagnostic capacity and preparedness to assist clientele with complex plant health issues.

5 p.m. DINNER ON YOUR OWN

Thursday, Aug. 20
Altitude Room, 33rd floor

8:15-8:30 a.m. Meet your Extension Master Gardener National Committee

8:30-9:20 a.m.

Fostering a Welcoming Environment and Culture

Kristian Salgado-Jacobo, Regional Operation Specialist, University of California; **Valerie T Borel**, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, University of California

The University of California Master Gardener program, as a land-grant institution, is committed to fostering a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all Californians to volunteer and grow their horticultural knowledge. Insights from the 2024 UC Master Gardener Statewide Volunteer Demographic Survey highlight significant gaps in reaching Hispanic/Latino, Black or African American, and Asian communities across California.

This session will explore how the UC Master Gardener program is building a more welcoming environment and culture through coordinator and volunteer professional development opportunities, including cultural awareness training to inform targeted program design and strengthen volunteer engagement. This session also reflects a broader commitment aligned with UC Agricultural National Resources 2025-2030 Strategic Goals and USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, ensuring equitable access to programs, identifying barriers, and developing actionable plans to address them.

9:30-10 a.m.

Local and Statewide Fundraising That Shows Impact and Public Value

Richard Kruczek, Extension Program Manager/Area Master Gardener Coordinator, Penn State Extension; **Val Sessler**, Extension Program Manager/Area Master Gardener Coordinator, Penn State Extension

Fundraising for Extension Master Gardener programs does not have to be complex. A well-organized event can simultaneously generate revenue, demonstrate measurable impact, and communicate clear public value to administrators, stakeholders, and the communities we serve. This presentation explores local and statewide fundraising strategies, including plant sales, Master Gardener-led workshops, webinars, speaking engagements, clothing sales, and annual giving campaigns, through the lens of outcome-based evaluation and Extension’s educational mission.



Participants will learn how to document fundraising impact using quantitative metrics such as attendance, revenue, volunteer hours, and educational contacts, alongside qualitative outcomes, including increased consumer knowledge and adoption of environmentally responsible practices. The session will address regulatory compliance, financial controls, and best practices that ensure accountability and protect public trust.

10-10:30 a.m.
Rooted in Data: Growing Colorado’s Dashboard into a National Reporting Ecosystem

Mike Eckhoff, Extension State Specialist: Data Systems Analysis and Design, Colorado State University;
Chris Hilgert, State Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Colorado State University

This presentation highlights the development and impact of a data dashboard system designed to support the Colorado Master Gardener program and considers how this model might inform a national Extension Master Gardener dashboard. Extension Master Gardener programs across the country are, first and foremost, a place for public Q&A — it’s been our core mission for over 50 years. In Colorado, our data dashboard consolidates helpdesk Q&A activity data into a streamlined, user-friendly interface that enables coordinators to monitor performance, identify trends, and make data-informed decisions in real time.

The system also creates a pathway for Colorado’s standardized, high-quality data to integrate with an upgraded national dashboard, aligning state-level reporting with broader Extension priorities and the needs of the National Master Gardener program. This two-tiered approach demonstrates how thoughtful data design at the state level could reduce duplication, improve consistency, and enhance the value of aggregated reporting.

Attendees will dive into volunteer helpdesk dashboards, gain insight into design principles, data wrangling strategies, and practical solutions for overcoming common challenges such as inconsistent data entry and evolving reporting requirements. The session will also explore how this model can be adapted by other states to strengthen both state program management and national-level insights.

Participants will leave with actionable ideas for building scalable, connected data systems that elevate the impact and visibility of Master Gardener program accomplishments.

10:30-11 a.m.
Small But Mighty: Statewide Master Gardener Program Administration in Little Rhody
Matt Durham, State Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, University of Rhode Island

Rhode Island’s small size brings both unique opportunities and immense challenges for managing a statewide Extension Master Gardener program. With limited staff and no county-based structure, the University of Rhode Island Master Gardener Program relies on centralized coordination, strong volunteer leadership, and adaptable programming models to meet the changing needs of our state.

This session explores how a “small but mighty” approach can create efficient, responsive programming while maintaining high impact. Participants will learn how Rhode Island leverages flexible program delivery and manages volunteer-driven initiatives to extend reach despite capacity constraints. The presentation will also address challenges such as appropriately scaling the program amid constant growth pressure and maintaining consistent communication and messaging with volunteers.

Attendees will gain practical ideas to streamline program administration and empower volunteer educators as leaders. While focused on a small-state model, the strategies shared are applicable to programs of all sizes seeking to innovate and maximize impact with constrained staffing.

11-11:30 a.m.
Good Fences Make Good Volunteers: Setting Boundaries and Expectations Via Basic Training for Long-Term Program Success
Erin Kinley, State Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Penn State University

Universities are often known for cumbersome processes and onerous policies. However, the Penn State Extension Master Gardener has leveraged everything from online event platforms to rigorous volunteer screening to curate a group of enthusiastic Master Gardeners who are eager to serve their communities. State Coordinator Erin Kinley will present the Basic Training recruitment and delivery process they use statewide, which has been successful in both expanding program impact and preventing volunteer conflict.

11:30-12:00 Coordinator Awards

12:00-1:30 Luncheon Buffet- Great Room 1 & 2- 6th Floor

1:30-2:20 p.m.
Weeding Through Conflict: Real-World Case Studies for MG Coordinators
Andy Faust, Extension Program Manager & Area Coordinator, Penn State University

Conflict is an inevitable part of managing passionate, committed volunteers, especially in Master Gardener programs, where individuals care deeply about their work, their time, and their impact. While conflict can feel uncomfortable or disruptive, it can also present valuable opportunities to strengthen relationships, clarify expectations, and build coordinator confidence.

This interactive session will explore common volunteer conflict scenarios using real-world case studies drawn from Master Gardener and Extension program experiences. The session will begin with a brief, facilitator-led overview of several authentic volunteer conflicts, highlighting frequent challenges such as communication breakdowns, boundary issues, role confusion, resistance to change, and interpersonal tension.

Participants will then break into small groups to actively work through selected case studies using guided role-play and structured discussion prompts. Each group will practice navigating a specific conflict scenario, focusing on effective communication strategies, de-escalation techniques, and decision-making approaches that balance program expectations with respect for volunteer relationships. The session will conclude with a short large-group debrief to share insights, lessons learned, and practical takeaways.

Participants will leave with increased confidence in addressing volunteer conflict, a clearer understanding of common pitfalls, and practical tools they can apply immediately when difficult situations arise.

2:30-3 p.m.
Setting Priorities for Busy Extension Professionals
Esther McGinnis, State Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, North Dakota State University

Extension Horticulture professionals face unique problems and stresses. They are bombarded with evening and weekend workshops and events, a flood of emails and texts, overwhelming reporting obligations, and the demands of many Extension Master Gardener volunteers. To compound the problem, Extension professionals are service-oriented and struggle to say no. This can result in exhaustion, burnout, and family stress. This session will introduce the highest and best use analysis, a concept inspired by real estate law. The highest and best use analysis will empower Extension professionals to set boundaries and stop doing mediocre work on too many projects. The emphasis will be on guarding your physical and mental energy to focus on a limited number of high-quality, impactful projects.

3-3:30 p.m.
Cultivating Connection: Retaining a Thriving Master Gardener Volunteer Community
Brittany A. Council-Morton, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, University of Florida;
Jonette Mungo, County Extension Director, North Carolina State University; **Kevin Camm**, County Extension Director, University of Florida

Retaining engaged and motivated Master Gardener Volunteers is essential to the long-term success and sustainability of the local program. This presentation shares practical, research-informed strategies designed to strengthen volunteer retention by aligning program structure with volunteer needs, motivations, and expectations. Direct volunteer feedback methods will be shared in addition to survey data that focuses on the key drivers of retention, such as meaningful engagement, continuing education opportunities, recognition, and strong social connections. This presentation will also highlight common barriers such as time constraints, communication gaps, and unclear role expectations.

Participants will gather additional insight into actionable approaches to improve retention, including enhancing onboarding experiences, offering flexible and diverse volunteer opportunities, mentoring opportunities, strengthening communication practices, and implementing intentional recognition efforts. Fostering a supportive and inclusive volunteer culture will generate long-term commitment and satisfaction.

Attendees will leave with adaptable tools and strategies to build a more resilient, engaged volunteer base, ultimately increasing program impact and ensuring the continued success of Master Gardener volunteer programs.

3:30-3:45 p.m. BREAK

3:45-4:15 p.m.
Growing Beyond Volunteers: Expanding Extension Reach Through a Sustainable Horticulture Certificate Course

Stephanie Pully, State Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, University of Maryland Extension

The continued education and enrichment of Master Gardener volunteers is critical to the growth of a program. For coordinators and program leaders managing increasing volunteer numbers with finite staffing, a hybrid model offers a scalable, sustainable approach. It supports diverse learner needs, expands access statewide, and equips Master Gardeners with advanced, practical skills, while reclaiming valuable coordinator hours and generating revenue.

4:15-4:45 p.m.

Growing Expertise Statewide: Lessons from Penn State Extension’s Hybrid Woody Plant Identification Program

Diane Dallos, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Penn State University

Penn State Extension Master Gardener’s Woody Plant Identification Advanced Certificate Program demonstrates how a thoughtfully designed hybrid education model can strengthen Master Gardener training, retention, and community impact without overwhelming program staff. By combining self-paced online learning modules with a one-time in-person learning experience, the program meets volunteers where they are, geographically, professionally, and seasonally, while maintaining the rigor and credibility expected of Extension education. Online modules provide consistent, science-based instruction covering over 180 woody plants, cultural requirements, and common pest and disease issues, allowing learners to progress at their own pace and revisit material as needed. In-person components reinforce learning through hands-on observation, peer discussion, and confidence-building practice in real landscapes, while sharing ideas for educational outreach.

4:45-5 p.m.

After-Summer School: A Chill Way to Maintain and Build Plant Clinic Skills

Amanda Woodlee, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Oregon State University

Weekly challenges are a fun way to keep volunteers’ Plant Clinic skills from getting rusty, build their confidence in answering the public’s gardening questions, and keep them engaged with the program during the quiet season. It’s also a sneaky way to direct their learning the way you would like it to go, even if they don’t participate! Learn the innovative way one county tried, how it went, and how you can try it with your Master Gardeners.

5-5:15 p.m.

Transitioning to an Online Training Improves the Mississippi Master Gardener Program

Jeff Wilson, State Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Mississippi State University

The Mississippi Master Gardener Volunteer Program first certified Master Gardeners in 1992. Currently celebrating its 35th year, the program has become one of Extension’s most successful outreach avenues, with over 1,400 volunteers assisting Extension agents in 62 of 82 Mississippi counties. The program is a major contributor to MSU Extension’s ability to meet its consumer horticulture needs in a timely and professional manner. Moving the initial participant training to an online

format has been instrumental in improving the overall Master Gardener program. The online format has helped increase enrollment, engagement, funding, diversity, and retention. Since the online format began in 2021, 1,002 participants have completed the initial training, with an 83% completion rate. The goals of introducing an online course were to provide a format with easier access for working and non-traditional participants and to improve the overall training and program. The online training has improved the statewide program in numerous ways.

5:15-5:30 p.m.

Scaling for Success: How a 30-Minute Lesson Reached 30,000 First Graders

Lisa Rand, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Pennsylvania State University

In 2024, Children under age 6 accounted for nearly 40% of all poison control center cases, making early safety education a critical public health priority. Through a partnership with the Penn State Extension Pesticide Education Program, Pennsylvania Master Gardener volunteers deliver a high-impact, 30-minute lesson to first-grade classrooms across the commonwealth, with the number of students reached growing from 18,087 in 2023 to 30,320 in 2025 across 51 counties, a 67% increase in just three years.

This session discusses the operational strategies behind that growth and offers a replicable framework for scaling high-volume youth programming. We’ll explore the standardized curriculum built around integrated pest management, hazard signal word recognition, and the Mr. Yuk symbol; how to leverage university partnerships and participation data to drive statewide results; strategies for reaching diverse audiences through bilingual English and Spanish materials; and a practical approach to managing large-scale volunteer logistics.

Whether you’re launching a new youth outreach initiative or growing an existing one, this session delivers a concrete blueprint for consistent program delivery and meaningful community impact.

5:30 p.m. DINNER ON YOUR OWN

Friday, Aug. 21
Altitude Room, 33rd floor

8:15-8:30 a.m. Review of the day

8:30-9 a.m.

Empowering Gardeners, Nourishing Community: A Seed Library Approach to Fighting Food Insecurity

Garnet Stanger, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, Iowa State University

The Linn County Iowa Master Gardener Seed Library shows how Extension-led, volunteer-powered programs can play a meaningful role in addressing local food insecurity. By providing free vegetable seeds, practical gardening education, and strong community partnerships, the program empowers individuals and families to grow their own food while strengthening the local food system.

This presentation highlights how Master Gardeners lead seed selection, distribution, and public education to reduce barriers for beginning and low-income gardeners. Participants will learn how a simple “grow a little extra” message encourages gardeners to share harvests with local food pantries, extending the impact beyond individual households. The session will also explore volunteer roles, partnerships that support food access, and outcomes that demonstrate community-level impact.

9-9:50 a.m.

Cultivating Community: A Proactive Approach to Engagement in Minnesota

Jennie Wagner, Extension Educator, Master Gardener Volunteer Program, University of Minnesota;
Jamie Spanks, Special Projects Coordinator, University of Minnesota

Based on the tremendous growth of our program and changing volunteer demographics, we have refined and redesigned our Community Engagement educational module for new volunteers. The result is Cultivating Community, a proactive learning module to address evolving program needs for all volunteers, including: developing volunteers as science communicators, prioritizing projects with high public value, and ensuring program values shape internal culture and external engagement.

For Master Gardener programs, effective community engagement is built on a commitment to volunteering and a strong foundation of research-based scientific information. Successful volunteer educators have a scientific understanding of horticulture and incorporate the audience’s prior knowledge and emotional state to encourage impactful behavior change and high public value. Over time, we have observed that volunteers lack some of these critical skills, which can isolate them from their communities, reduce the program’s effectiveness, and erode trust in Extension.

In this session, we will discuss the framing, motivation, and application for Cultivating Community. Participants will learn about resources we use, formatting and distribution methods, potential barriers to use, and considerations for implementation. Learners will gain tools and inspiration to enhance their current community engagement models, resulting in higher public value and stronger science-informed programming.



Building Strong Foundations Through Master Gardener Admission Interviews

Eva Maria Pabon, Local/County Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, University of Florida

Admission interviews are a critical yet often underutilized tool for building strong, mission-driven Master Gardener volunteer programs. As Extension programs face increasing community demand alongside limited staffing, coordinators must be intentional in how volunteers are selected, oriented, and engaged from the outset. This workshop draws on qualitative observations of Master Gardener volunteers' admission interviews to examine how prospective volunteers communicate motivation, readiness, and alignment with Extension and Master Gardener Program values. Both verbal responses and non-verbal behaviors are examined as indicators of commitment to community education, lifelong learning, horticultural stewardship, and service. The interview process is framed not only as a screening mechanism but as a formative moment that reinforces program culture, clarifies expectations, and shapes volunteer identity early in the program experience. Emphasis is placed on how thoughtful interview practices can strengthen volunteer alignment, reduce future challenges, and support long-term retention. Coordinators will gain applied insights and practical considerations for using admission interviews more effectively to cultivate engaged, value-aligned, and successful volunteer teams.

Attendees will leave with practical tools to strengthen volunteer leadership, foster cross-county collaboration, and frame fundraising activities as mission-aligned educational interventions, not just revenue generators. Whether coordinating a county plant sale or launching a statewide webinar series, coordinators will discover how strategic fundraising can deliver sustainable returns on investment while advancing Extension's public value.

10:30-11 a.m.

Making Impact Visible at Every Stage: Retaining Master Gardeners Through Purpose-Driven Service

Kimberly Rohling, Horticulture Educator, University of Illinois Extension; **Erica Lunde**, Program Coordinator, University of Illinois Extension

As Master Gardener programs respond to changing demographics and volunteer expectations, retention is strongest when volunteers can clearly see the value and impact of their service. This session highlights a collaborative herbarium-mounting project between University of Illinois Extension, Plants of Concern, and Southern Illinois University Carbondale as a model for sustaining engagement through purpose-driven contributions to science and conservation. Designed with aging and less mobile volunteers in mind, the

project offers a supportive, manageable setting that allows participants to apply their skills while collectively producing a significant number of herbarium specimens during times of the year when contributing to outdoor natural resource stewardship is unpleasant. By tracking and sharing clear impact metrics such as number of volunteers, effort contributed, and number of specimens mounted the program reinforces volunteer purpose, recognition, and satisfaction. This presentation demonstrates how inclusive, outcome-focused volunteer opportunities increase satisfaction and retention among longtime volunteers while helping Master Gardener programs remain resilient and relevant in a changing world.

11-11:30 a.m.

Magnificent Moths: Engaging Communities with Science, Art, and Imagination

Erin Garrett, Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy Educator, University of Illinois Extension;
Anne Townsend, Program Coordinator, University of Illinois Extension

Magnificent Moths is a fun educational event created by University of Illinois Extension and held during National Moth Week. Designed as a family-oriented program held at local Illinois Department of Natural Resources sites, this program is a favorite among Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists. This annual event combines educational outreach about moths with the whimsy of larger-than-life caterpillar and moth replicas and costumes created by volunteers. Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists dress as moths while staffing 10 to 12 booths that engage families in learning about moths vs. butterflies, the importance of native plants, how moths eat and communicate, invasive moths, and more. Come learn about our program and get creative ideas for your volunteers' outreach efforts.

Thank you so much for attending
the 2026 National Extension Master
Gardener Coordinator Conference!

We hope you've enjoyed the great state of Illinois!

Notes:

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Illinois Extension

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University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating.

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