

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

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New hybrid model expands Master Gardener and Naturalist training options

For a few years, new volunteers had the choice to complete the 60-hour Extension Master Gardener training in one of two ways: a face-to-face class or individually online. In 2021, the University of Illinois Extension horticulture and natural resources team in the Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit combined the best of both options and created a hybrid model for Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists.

“We designed it so participants did part of their training using a variety of online instructional materials,” explained Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle, horticulture educator. “Then they attended face-to-face sessions that expanded on that week’s topics through hands-on learning, tours of local gardens and natural areas, and hearing from local experts.”

Extension staff vetted, created, and curated the online materials that included videos, websites, and articles. Private Facebook Groups were also utilized to allow for continued discussion and the sharing of extra resources among the staff and participants.

The hybrid model gave participants more flexibility with the time commitment needed to complete the intense EMG and EMN trainings. The face-to-face sessions were shorter hours than the traditional training. And the online portion could be completed as time allowed throughout the week.

“We also know the value in providing opportunities for trainees to connect with each other, current master volunteers, staff, and partners,” continued Nicole. “Everyone loves getting outside and exploring new-to-them sites, all while learning.”

Some of hybrid training sites for Master Gardeners include Luthy Botanical Gardens, Tres Rojas Winery, and Orchard Hill Farm. The Master Naturalists visited City Kids Camp, Jake Wolfe fish Hatchery, and Tawny Oaks Field Station.

Master Naturalist trainee Lori Hanson said, “The work they do at the fish hatchery is fascinating.” After a visit to Garden of Hope Megan Steier, Master Gardener trainee, said, “this garden is so inspiring, I am so glad I had the opportunity to see it.”

Five Master Gardener trainees, plus eight Master Naturalist trainees were the official inaugural hybrid class graduates. An additional four online trainees took advantage of the invite to attend any of the face-to-face sessions.



Extension Master Gardener trainee Pam Wiley spent a morning learning at Garden of Hope during the EMG hybrid-training session. After an interactive tour of the garden, trainees jumped in and helped harvest okra, peppers, green beans, and tomatoes. The hybrid model gives participants more opportunities to connect and learn from each other, get a sense of volunteer opportunities, and apply what they learned from the online training materials.

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