

## Pueblo Chieftain: Master motivation

By MARY JEAN PORTER, July 18, 2011



Master gardeners Jerry Stimpfl (left), president of the Farmer Marketeers, and Paul Hoffman, vice president, work at the master gardeners' booth in the Midtown Farmers Market.



Master gardener Paul Hoffman, vice president of the Farmer Marketeers, helps Barbara Sanford (right) and Nicole Sanford at the Midtown Farmers Market.

They aren't weed-pullers — they're teachers.

Pueblo County's master gardeners are highly motivated volunteers who've paid for university-caliber training so they can help other gardeners. They're passionate about everything from growing fruits and veggies to making compost to landscaping with native plants to saving precious water and going easy on the chemicals.



Master gardener Pat Myers holds an armful of flowers that she grew at her St. Charles Mesa home

Local master gardeners run the farmers market at Midtown Shopping Center, they care for several demonstration gardens around the city, they organize and present annual garden- and landscape-themed events. They teach classes, staff information booths, write articles. In a year, they answer an encyclopedia's worth of questions, often "What is this stuff that's taking over my yard?"

Linda McMulkin, horticulture coordinator for the Pueblo County office of Colorado State University Extension, says master gardeners greatly extend the educational reach of the extension service.

"We treasure them all," she says.



Horticulture coordinator Linda McMulkin (center) and master gardeners examine a leaf and consult a textbook at the Pueblo Zoo during a recent plant diagnostic class. From left are Paul Hoffman, Merle Warren, Sylvia Sanchez and Terry Goff

The local master gardeners' dedication shows up in statistics kept for the program: In 2009, Pueblo County ranked seventh among 10 Front Range counties for the number of master gardener volunteers but first in the average number of hours given by the volunteers. A few of the gardeners are from Otero and Crowley counties, which take part in the Pueblo County master gardener program.



Terry Goff gets a close-up look at a leaf while learning to diagnose plant problems at a continuing education class for master gardeners.

In 2010, 64 local master gardeners reported doing 3,954 hours of volunteer work in the community, and they reached a huge audience through written materials published in newspapers and online newsletters. The annual dollar value of their time is estimated at \$86,000, according to McMulkin.

### **Rooted in research|**

The Colorado Master Gardener program was started in 1975, with the intent of providing science-based information to the public. Master gardeners go through 60 hours of training taught by specialists and extension agents and are required to complete 12 hours of continuing education in subsequent years. Committing to do volunteer work is an integral part of the program.

"One of the things I always emphasize to volunteers is that CSU Extension is the research arm of the university," McMulkin says. "Our goal is to give people the information to help them get better (at gardening), not to do it for them.

"The classes are consistent across the counties, which is one of the strengths of the program. We know what we are teaching is all based in science. It is all based in research. All the materials are written by specialists and extension agents who are educated in horticulture, in terminology that any gardener can understand."

All of the states have master gardener programs that are associated with their land-grant universities, though the focus and structure of the programs vary depending on the state's location. Gardeners in Maryland and Virginia need different skills and information from ones in Colorado and New Mexico.

## **Following their passion|**

So who are these master gardeners?

One is Liz Catt, a part-time employee in the local CSU Extension office, whose job is helping volunteers of differing interests (including master gardeners) work where their passions lead them. Do they love growing vegetables? Are they experts in xeriscaping? Do they want to start a community garden?

Catt helps them find a place, a program or an event where they can share with the public what they've learned in the training and on the ground.

Master gardeners, she explains, staff an information desk at the extension office, where they answer gardening questions, hand out information, identify (if they're able) bugs and plant diseases. They have CSU's horticulture resources at their disposal, plus a large library of books. The phone number of the Rocky Mountain Poison Control Center is posted prominently on the office wall for quick referrals.

"Hopefully, we're prepared to send callers where they need to go," Catt says. "Sometimes, we send them on to someone in this (extension) office. We're teaching them to grow all these vegetables, why not show them how to preserve them in an extension-sponsored class?"

Merle Warren of Swink took the master gardener training in 2005 after retiring from a railroad job.

"I was very pleased with the training," he says. "When I first started, I thought I knew how to garden, then I went around for about two weeks correcting my mistakes in case anyone from the class came by — and they did."

He says he'd recommend the master gardener program to others who are interested in gardening.

Warren does his volunteer work through the Otero County Extension office in Rocky Ford.

"People who have trouble with their lawns or trees call the office and I go out and make a house call. For me it's better to go out and see what's happening than to have to try to explain over the phone. I get to meet a lot of nice people that way."

Warren loves to garden at home and has met his retirement goal of planting 30 fruit trees.

Pat Myers is another master gardener who waited for retirement to take the training. She's been in the program for a decade and loves it. She volunteers at the Midtown Farmers Market, she's worked with local home and garden shows and been involved in garden tours.

"I've been a part of every committee — I just enjoy it thoroughly," she says. "I enjoy the camaraderie of people, I enjoy meeting the new master gardeners. I remember I was so enthused when I first started."

Myers, who grew up on a farm/ranch in the Gardner area, says she's been growing things since she was a kid, but before taking the master gardener training, "I'd just see flowers I thought were pretty and plant them. I didn't realize there were soil combinations or categories of plants. The training gave me a good idea of where to place plants that need more moisture. Finally, after a lifetime, I think I've got it."

Marilynn Chambers became a master gardener in 2000 when she and her husband moved here from Iowa.

"We came face-to-face with Pueblo West's soils, heat, low water and intense sunshine," she says. "It was so different from what I was used to."

Although she had been gardening for many years, she learned a lot from the more formal training of the master gardener classes.

"I think I learned that I like sharing that knowledge," Chambers says. "People moving here from all parts of the country are running into the same conditions I did."

Chambers gives back to the community by volunteering at the Cattail Crossing xeriscape demonstration garden in Pueblo West where free, informal mini-workshops are offered on the second Saturday of the month. She's also on the planning committee for the Western Landscape Symposium and the xeriscape garden tours, she writes a gardening column for The Pueblo West View, and she's a certified Native Plant Master, which is another CSU Extension plant-related program.

People who are interested in the master gardener program may call the Pueblo County CSU Extension office at 583-6566 for more information, or go to [www.cmg.colostate.edu](http://www.cmg.colostate.edu). An alternate program for people who can't fulfill the volunteer commitment is available, but the tuition is higher.