

Master Gardener Program

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SPEAKERS

Christa Hartsook, Susan DeBlieck

C Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life. In this episode, I interview Susan DeBlieck, Master Gardener Program Coordinator for Iowa State University Extension outreach to talk about the Master Gardener Program. I'm Christa Hartsook, small farms program coordinator, and we hope you enjoy the show. Susan, welcome. Thanks for being on.

S Susan DeBlieck 00:45

Thanks for having me. Christa. It's so great to finally connect with you.

C Christa Hartsook 00:48

Yeah, I'm excited that we can talk about the program today. So let's start out could you give our listeners a little bit of background on the Master Gardener program itself?

S Susan DeBlieck 00:57

Sure, sure. So the Iowa master gardener program in 2019, we're celebrating our 40th anniversary. So the program started, at least in Iowa. It started in Bettendorf in Scott County, and over the past 40 years has been a part of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. And the focus is really neighbors helping each other. So some people think that being a master gardener means that you're somehow an expert. But really what it means is that you're a volunteer on behalf of extension, and you're doing things to help your neighbors like creating

pollinator gardens, supporting planning for school gardens, maybe helping to attend a demonstration garden at the county fairgrounds. Or some listeners may have seen the the awesome Master Gardener demonstration garden at the Iowa State Fairgrounds.

C Christa Hartsook 01:53

It's one of my favorite spots to visit every year. They do such an amazing job there. Susan, how many Master Gardeners are in Iowa? What are we looking like their numbers wise?

S Susan DeBlieck 02:04

Yeah, so we've got 2000 People that are volunteering as Iowa master gardeners. And then if we look back over our 40 year history, we've trained about 14,000 people with the Master Gardener training program.

C Christa Hartsook 02:19

That is amazing. So if we have people out there that are interested in the Master Gardener program, how do they get involved?

S Susan DeBlieck 02:26

Yeah, so there are a few ways to get involved in the Iowa master gardener program. One is to check out our calendar of upcoming events that's on the Iowa Master Gardener website. I tried to, I tried to add upcoming events that are going on all over the state. And one of the things happening soon in May and in June, is plant sales. So Master Gardeners use plant sales as a way to get more plants into their community, whether they're native plants or plants for pollinators. And so those are going on around the state. And so that's an exciting way to connect to the Master Gardener program. There are also webcasts that are being shown at extension county offices. And these are shown in the spring and in the summer. And there are a way for gardeners and people who love plants in the community to come together and learn about some garden topics. And this year, the spring, some two of the topics are container gardening, and also managing vegetable pests.

C Christa Hartsook 03:37

Awesome. Those are great opportunities for our listeners out there. Susan, there's very specific trainings required for the Master Gardener program. Can you talk to me a little bit about those?

S Susan DeBlieck 03:47

Yeah, so the training to become a master gardener happens each fall. And it depends on where you're located if your county hosts it every year, or maybe every other year, or maybe a little bit less frequently. But what the training is, is that it's 40 hours of gathering information about

plants and about insects. And it's offered August through November. And usually it's offered at about two dozen locations around the state. So I know it's no fun to drive to two classes over that long of a period. But we do. We do offer the training all over the state. And so you can find out if the Master Gardener training is being offered near you if you contact your county extension office and see if they're offering it or you can go online and see our application for the Master Gardener training and that's got a list of the locations that are planning right now to offer it. And one of the most fun pieces of the Master Gardener training is that so the training happens at the local level. And then on October 19, which is Saturday, this fall, all of these people who are all of these 300 people who are being trained to become master gardeners come to Iowa State University and do a hands on day. And it's super fun and exciting to get to meet people, and find out what sort of projects they want to start working on when they become a master gardener with their volunteer hours.

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Christa Hartsook 05:24

That's awesome. Let's talk a little bit about that volunteer requirement, then talk to me a little bit about that, or maybe some common things people are doing to meet that volunteer hour requirement.

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Susan DeBlieck 05:35

Sure, sure. So after, after people finish the Master Gardener training, they have a little bit over a year, to complete 40 volunteer hours. And then after they complete those 40 volunteer hours, they officially get the title Master Gardener. And it really depends on people's interests, and also what's going on in their county in terms of what sort of projects there are. So in some cases, those people are asked to support existing Master Gardener projects. So I already talked about plant sales, some master gardeners have sort of like a help booth at a farmers market to answer questions. Some of some of them have these gardens that they need extra hands to plant and things like that. And really, what it comes down to is that volunteer hours, they need to be in a public place. So you can't count your own backyard or your friend's backyard, as your place where you're doing these volunteer hours. And then also that there is some sort of educational piece that you're maybe interacting with the public and sharing your excitement or your knowledge with your neighbors.

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Christa Hartsook 06:46


That makes sense. Susan, you talked a little bit about some of these events, you know, some of these plant sales that are coming up, maybe some of the webcasts are there other kinds of events, specifically for master gardeners.

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Susan DeBlieck 06:59

Those are main pieces that are offered by the master gardener program, we don't give out a VIP pass that only Master Gardeners get to do certain things. I'm really excited about the international Master Gardener conference that's coming up this summer in Pennsylvania. But


again, almost all of our events that are offered even that international Master Gardener conference, you don't have to be a Master Gardener volunteer, but maybe you want to become one after meeting some really cool people who love plants and volunteer in their community.

 Christa Hartsook 07:29

That sounds great. Susan, I know Master Gardeners have done some really amazing things for some Iowa food pantries. Could you talk to us a little bit about that?

 07:40

Sure, sure. So we've got this project called growing together. And what it is, is it's building upon what Master Gardener volunteers were already doing. So about four years ago, I started looking with my colleague, Christine Roddick at what some master gardeners were doing. And they had these donation gardens where they were growing fruits and vegetables specifically for donation to their local food pantry. And so what we did is we started putting some money behind that. And so growing together offers mini grants to Master Gardener volunteers who are focused on donation, gardening. Or maybe like in the case of Sioux City, they're coordinating a planter row program, where they're collecting produce that's, that's donated by gardeners and getting it into the food pantry system. We've donated 240,000 pounds in the past three years through this project. And it's pretty cool to see that Iowa Master Gardeners are leading the country. Now we've got six other states that are replicating this growing together model and really trying to get more fresh fruits and vegetables into food pantries and food banks and, and those types of places.

 Christa Hartsook 08:58

That's an amazing thing for those in our communities that are a little bit more food insecure. So what a great program to learn more about. Susan, how can we find out if there's a Master Gardener group, specifically in our community? Can we go to that website you mentioned before?

 09:13

Yeah. So if you're curious to find out if there are Master Gardener volunteers in your community, I'd recommend reaching out to your county extension office. So just reaching out and seeing, you know, are there other master gardeners what what sorts of events are going on that you could be a part of and then maybe you also want to sign up for the training that's happening this fall, the training is \$195. And it's a really great value. If we look at other states, most of their master gardener trainings are over \$250 that they're offering it for. And for the Master Gardener training that's happening this fall, a bunch of counties are doing flipped classroom so they're getting into more hands on activities. So they're going and touring arboretum's, or orchards and really seeing, seeing plants up close. And so it's pretty, pretty exciting changes now that we're able to do a little bit more hands on Master Gardener training in our communities.

C Christa Hartsook 10:18

That's awesome. Susan, if we just wanted a little bit more information, or we really kind of wanted to look around on the website itself, could you give us that address?

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Sure, sure. So the website address is extension.iastate.edu/mastergardener, and a couple other places, I'd recommend checking out the Iowa Master Gardener Program is to come to our Facebook page. So you can see what plants were getting excited about now that it's finally spring. And then also, we're on Twitter and on YouTube. So on YouTube, you can see videos of some Iowa Master Gardener projects, and also learn some more about plants from our experts.

C Christa Hartsook 11:00

Those are great resources to share. So thank you for that. Are there anything else that we really should know if we were investigating Master Gardener programs today?

S Susan DeBlieck 11:09

Yeah, I just reiterate that a lot of folks think that being a master gardener means that you're somehow an expert, but it really doesn't. It means that you're somebody who's passionate about helping your community, and you want to volunteer in your community and plants might be one way that you do that and give back to your community. So it's a great way to get involved in your local community and also a great way to connect to ISU Extension and Outreach.

C Christa Hartsook 11:38

Susan, thanks so much for being on the show today. We really appreciate it.

S Susan DeBlieck 11:42

Thank you.