

IMPACT

University of Idaho
Extension

Washington County, 208.414.0415

Fax: 208.414.0469

485 East Third, Weiser, ID 83672

River Valley Master Gardener program teaching successes in Idaho communities

The Situation

Since 2007, the River Valley Master Gardener objectives have been to provide residents in a multi-county area (Gem, Payette, and Washington County) training in various aspects of horticulture. The course requires participants to give back 35 volunteer hours to the program through service in their local communities in the form of projects and Extension office diagnostic clinics. The program provides participants with knowledge to practice and recommend environmentally sustainable and integrated pest management techniques.

Each year master gardeners in the River Valley Program have recorded steady increases in volunteer hours and participation in Extension activities. Over the past five years program accomplishment included: six 10 to 14 week master gardener courses, trained 112 volunteers, and volunteers donated 7,335 hours, answering 971 inquiries during diagnostic clinics (204 clinics since 2007). These measures, however, do not provide assessment on the important issue of how confident the volunteers are in applying what they have learned through their training.

Our Response

To assess individual program impact on individual participants, a multi-evaluation tool developed by E. Swackhamer and N. Keirnan was conducted. An initial survey was given as part of the Fall course evaluation to measure the effectiveness of each topic taught. A second survey was mailed to past and current certified master gardeners from the River Valley regional program during the Fall of 2011. The objective of the second survey was to measure the long-term impact of the training and the participant's involvement in the program. The evaluation attempted

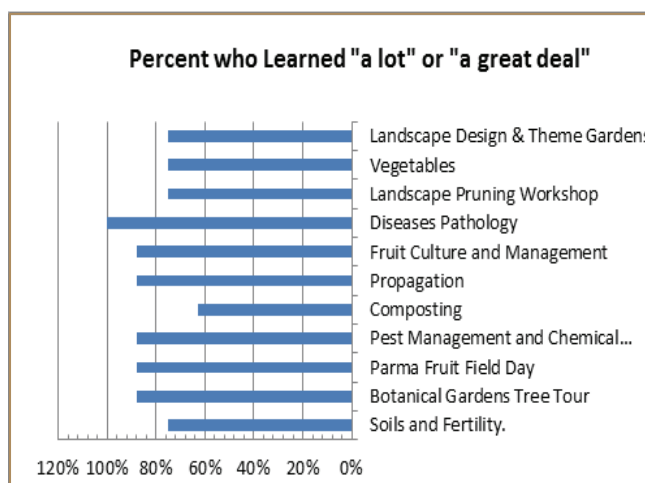


Figure 1. 2011 master gardener post-class evaluation percentage of learning in 11 topics.

to determine the program success in meeting six planned program objectives:

1. Plan to use, and then actually adopt recommended gardening practices in their own gardens.
2. Teach recommended gardening practices to other home gardeners.
3. Improve their skills for working with others.
4. Understand the requirements of completing and maintaining their Master Gardener status.
5. Believe they can find appropriate and meaningful volunteer activities.
6. Believe they are a valuable member of the program.

Program Outcomes

The first survey, returned by 10 master gardeners, indicated significant increase of knowledge in all

class topics. The first question asked participants how much they learned in each class using a “close-ended with ordered responses” question format. The percent of participants who learned “a lot” or “a great deal” about the topics was substantial (Figure 1). Topics that provided the greatest percentage of increased knowledge were plant diseases, fruit management, propagation, pest management, and tree identification.

The second survey sent to current and past certified master gardeners tended to have similar results to the first survey. Participants returned 37 mailed surveys with a 48% response rate. Survey results indicated they were confident in fielding questions before class in ornamental landscape plants and vegetable production. Participants significantly increased in confidence in fielding questions on topics such as botany, soils, lawns, diseases, and pruning (Figure 2).

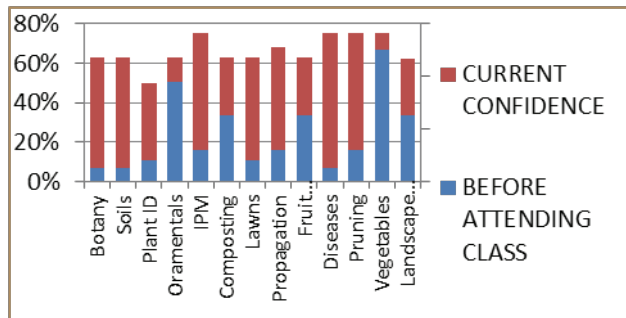


Figure 2. Confidence in ability to field questions in 13 topics.

This increase in confidence suggests that participants are receiving the knowledge needed in the course to field questions and are continuing to learn after program requirements are met. This is supported by the 90% of respondents that indicated their involvement in the course taught them how to acquire information. In addition, 75% also indicated they were more capable of solving gardening problems. Participants are teaching community members these practices.

Participants have adopted the following practices as a result of the program: identifying insects, diseases, and weeds

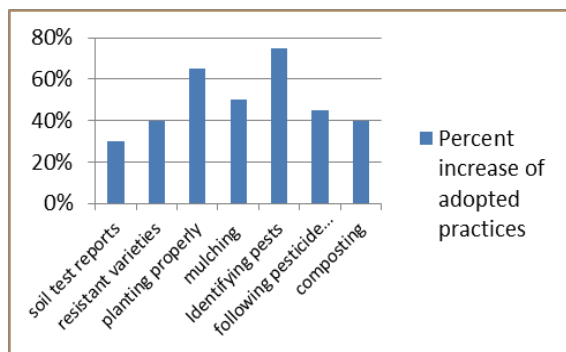


Figure 3. “Often” used concept percent increase since before starting the program.

before spraying pesticide, planting best management practices, and mulching landscape plants properly. Participants indicated significant use of environmental stewardship practices and other topics of importance (Figure 3).

Of the 37 respondents over 70% indicated they “sometimes” or “often” teach classes in their communities on subjects such as: choosing plants, planting recommendations, mulching landscape plants, identifying pests prior to giving control recommendations, and composting. Other impacts included 18% of respondents are working in horticulture related jobs since taking the class, 73% considered themselves valuable master gardeners, and 60% were more willing to accept challenges since taking the class.

This evaluation indicates that the River Valley Master Gardener program is effectively accomplishing all six program goals.

References

E. Swackhamer & N.E. Kiernan. (2005). A Multipurpose Evaluation Strategy for Master Gardener Training Programs. *Journal of Extension* (On-line), Volume 43 (6) Feature Article 6FEA4. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2005december/a4.php>

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Tony McCammon, Extension Educator
 University of Idaho Extension, Washington County
 485 East Third
 Weiser, ID 83672
 Phone: 208.414.0415
 Fax: 208.414.0469
 E-mail: tonym@uidaho.edu