

Why I Became a Master Gardener



Mah-jongg, bridge, Tai Chi, and a couple of brain-numbing workshops on how to organize and edit photos on my iPhone. I've tried all these activities in my retirement. But the master gardener course tops my list for the most worthwhile since I took it four years ago.

I've always been impressed by the commitment master gardeners make to study horticulture, the art and science of growing plants. The coursework covers some of the same ground that a college degree program or professional certification in this field might, but it's geared toward home gardeners who want to volunteer their specialized skills and knowledge to help make their communities greener. You might encounter these plant geeks helping out in garden centres, volunteering at farmers markets, working in community gardens, or leading workshops at public gardens.

When applying to the program, I struggled to answer why I wanted to become a master gardener. It was difficult to distill my many reasons into an answer that fit in the space allowed on the form. There was no room to wax on about my lifelong love of flowers and fresh veggies. I couldn't squeeze in an adequate description of how the way my yard smells after a rain makes me feel. And mentioning the fact that I grew up on a farm and am most comfortable in jeans and flannel shirts seemed sort of shallow. So I wrote: I'm happiest when digging in the dirt.

Soon after, I became a trainee in the master gardener program coordinated by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. It includes 40 hours of class time spread over 4 months and a day of horticulture lectures at Iowa State University. Topics of instruction include plant diseases, composting, and sustainable home landscape design.

Once all the book learning is completed, trainees are required to volunteer 40 hours with a master gardener project. My favourite was working in the greenhouse in March to help prepare for our annual plant sale in May. In the plastic-covered, hoop-style greenhouse, the scent of humus and damp soil filled the air. Some days, a wintery wind incessantly whipped the plastic against the hoops, reminding me of the bone-chilling cold outside, but in the greenhouse it was always cozy and warm.

The first time I volunteered in the greenhouse, I was shown how to fill trays with soil, how to sow seeds in them, and how to water from the bottom of the tray to avoid disturbing what I had planted. A week or so later, the seeds had sprouted, and I learned how to carefully move each tiny seedling into its own pot so it could grow. It all felt more like play than work as I laboured over “my” plant babies with other Master Gardeners in training. In the years since, when March rolls around I still think about planting seedlings in a toasty greenhouse smelling of rich, damp soil.

I made so many pleasant memories like this one, but when people ask me what I learned from my master gardener training, once again I struggle to summarize everything that makes it such an inspiring part of my life. Thinking back, several tidbits have lodged in my brain, almost like gardening mantras, that now guide everything I do in my garden. The first that springs to mind is that we plant in soil, not dirt, like I so naively wrote on my application. Dirt, according to the master gardener workbook, is soil where you don't want it—it's what's under your fingernails and the muck on the throw rug by your back door.

Now I know that soil is complex, amazing stuff upon which all life depends. Surely this elevates it far above lowly dirt. A key part of soil is organic matter. We talked so much about organic matter that we all called it OM for short. The more OM you have in your soil, the more your plants will thrive. I used to think of grass clippings, fallen leaves, and other yard debris as garden waste to get rid of, but now I save every bit to compost and turn into OM for my soil.

Becoming a master gardener also got me out of a rut I didn't even know I was in when it came to plants. Every year, my go-tos for something colorful in my containers were geraniums and petunias. After learning more about all the exciting options I could use in containers, now I fill my pots with sweet potato vines, ornamental grasses, gomphrena, cosmos, and even dahlias.

I enjoy experimenting with new varieties and species, but I still spend much (make that most) of my gardening time weeding. I've always found this chore somewhat meditative and relaxing and love how nice a flower bed looks afterward. But I learned a few tricks during my training to up my weeding game. One is that it's best to pull a weed by hand instead of clipping or hoeing so you have a better chance of getting all the roots. Another is to wait to weed until after a soaking rain or to soften hard, dry soil by watering the night before—it'll be much easier to pull up roots.

The master gardener course even got me to change how I treat my tools. Before, I usually knocked off the largest clods of soil on my tools and hung them up. Cleaning off all the soil with a spray of water is my new routine. Why? Because a fellow master gardener told me that taking good care of your equipment helps it last longer, plus I found that I really like having clean tools at the ready. This goes for gardening gloves, too. I toss them in the washer and let them air-dry; they come out almost as good as new.

So while my digital photo library is currently in a reasonable state of organization and I enjoy

a good game of mah-jongg or bridge now and then, I use my master gardener training almost every day. It's something I can use to help other people and myself to live a more colorful life. Looking at all the ways that this program changed the way I garden, there's one thing that hasn't changed: I'm still happiest when I'm digging in the dirt...er, soil.

by Marie McCartan, Iowa Extension Master Gardener.