

# GEORGIA MASTER GARDENER STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026

A guide for the Georgia Master Gardener  
Extension Volunteer Program

PREPARED BY  
THE STATE PROGRAM OFFICE  
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LEARN SERVE GROW



Master Gardener Extension Volunteer Program

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# GEORGIA MASTER GARDENER STRATEGIC PLAN

The Extension Master Gardener (EMG) volunteer program is the means by which land-grant universities' Extension service and United States Department of Agriculture extend consumer horticulture programming to the public. In Georgia, the program is administered by the University of Georgia and is known as the Georgia Master Gardener Extension Volunteer (MGEV) Program.

## VISION

*The MGEV Program vision is to share the art and science of horticulture to foster healthy, greener communities.*

## MISSION

*Our mission is to assist UGA Extension in providing consumer horticulture information and services to Georgia communities.*

## VALUES

*We will achieve our mission with science-based resources, volunteer services, collaborative partnerships, and knowledge and experience.*

# EXTERNAL CONDITIONS, TRENDS, AND ASSUMPTIONS THAT AFFECT THE GEORGIA MASTER GARDENER EXTENSION VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

To gain insight into program dynamics, the Strategic Planning Team launched a listening process in August 2020. The listening process was two-fold: input was solicited via online Qualtrics survey and in facilitated discussions (Table 1). Four programmatic pillars (Training of Volunteers, Programming for the Public, Program Promotion, and Accountability) were explored in the listening process. Four audiences (MGEVs and Trainees, Extension agents and program assistants, state specialists and administration, and the general public) were invited to respond to the online surveys. Internal audiences (MGEVs and Trainees, Extension agents and program assistants, and state specialists and administration) were invited to participate in virtual, open-ended facilitated discussions using a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) framework. The following is a brief summary of findings.

**TABLE 1. VALID SURVEY RESPONSES AND DISCUSSION SESSION PARTICIPANTS\***

	Survey	Discussion
MGEV	567	21
Agents and PAs	57	21
State Specialists	29	3
State Admin		15
Public	80	n/a
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>733</b>	<b>60</b>
<i>Average years with Extension = 8.25±9.3</i>		

## EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

**A bit of history:** In the 1970s, plant clinics and troubleshooting services were the original EMG volunteer projects. In the years since, outreach has expanded to include efforts to change client behavior related to target issues, such as yard waste, turf management, or pollinator protection. MGEV outreach most commonly includes presentations, demonstration gardens, media efforts, and youth education to extend research-based information and practices to the public.

Survey responses across all audiences indicate that MGEV educational programs meet customer and stakeholder needs and increase awareness of consumer horticulture and environmental stewardship. Educational programming priorities remain focused here, with continued attention given to educating youth, administering demonstration gardens, developing media (written, social, video, etc.), and offering diagnostic services, preferably utilizing technology to match skilled, knowledgeable volunteers with clients throughout the state. Because youth repeatedly appeared as a critical target audience for horticulture programming, MGEVs will need to be prepared to educate school-age youth as well as young adults. In the future, human well-being will be an important concept to be included in programming and needs further research basis.

Consumer horticulture practices have been based on research in production horticulture as well as related areas, such as turf, soils, entomology, and plant pathology, and has traditionally provided the content basis for training MGEVs. Little to no research emphasis has been placed on home gardening practices or the consumer gardener.

Agents are most in favor of having a research faculty member specializing in CH, followed closely by public and MGEV respondents. There is some interest for an endowed research faculty position.

## VOLUNTEERS

The Georgia MGEV Program has operated under the direction of UGA Extension since 1979. Georgia's program demographics mirror those at the national level, where Extension Master Gardener (EMG) volunteers are primarily female, retired, highly educated, and of economic means. Volunteer numbers peaked in the early 2010s and have steadily decreased since.

Survey input revealed that constrained time is the leading reason people do not participate in the program. Program growth was seen as a function of engaging more volunteers and improving educational outreach by MGEVs. There was some support for increasing the capacity of the State Program Office as well as for additional support to county offices.

Survey and discussion data both indicated a need to diversify program participation and to make the program more accessible to individuals of all demographics. Respondents suggest that the best way to recruit new MGEVs is to offer flexible or customizable training options, having a strong statewide promotional media campaign, and to increase the interactions between people who like plants and gardening.

## TRAINING

Learning is the primary motivation for individuals who become EMG volunteers. The Georgia MGEV Program currently requires 42 hours of training in basic horticulture to prepare volunteers for the various projects and activities they will encounter. Training is typically delivered in-person, once or twice a week during business hours, for a span of 8-12 weeks. Fees for supplies, including the training textbook, are primarily used for cost recovery at the county level.

The time of day training is currently offered may not be ideal for potential volunteers. Online training offered outside of business hours is very appealing to potential volunteers, though alternative training times are limited by Extension business hours, personnel availability, volunteer service opportunities (primarily during business hours), and the availability of prospective volunteers.

Respondents somewhat agreed that the cost of training is affordable for individuals who wish to participate. Though there was some support for scholarships, they may not sufficiently address program accessibility concerns, such as availability for training or volunteer service.

MGEVs remain with the program for many years (national average = 7.65 years, ranging from 1 to 40+ years), necessitating continued education and advanced training to ensure current information and skills. Continuing education (CE) has been strongly recommended for Georgia MGEVs since 2015. Currently, the state recommendation is 6 hours annually, which is less than national standards (10 hours continuing education annually). Georgia MGEVs are making steady progress toward the 6-hour recommendation but still lag behind the national standard (10 hours annually).

The Advanced Training program for Georgia MGEVs includes 6-hour blocks of training offered in 6 categories. Training is offered in several formats, including in-person, online, and a hybrid of both, and are offered in many locations around the state, with cost per training ranging from \$10 to \$50.

There is receptivity across all responder groups for a CE requirement. Though respondents weakly agreed that the current 6-hour recommendation is sufficient for remaining informed as a MGEV, there is some support for requiring 10 hours annually to meet national program standards.

Agents indicate that Georgia's Advanced Training (AT) program offers opportunity for personal growth and development, though MGEVs are less confident that AT provides additional knowledge or skills to better support educational programming. Respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that time of day is convenient for participants, and there was definite interest from agents/program assistants and MGEVs in online, distance training methods. Cost was viewed favorably among respondents.

## SERVICE

Currently, there is an initial 50-hour service requirement following training and an annual 25-hour volunteer service requirement for active status. Some volunteer opportunities are in group format, while others are independent activities. Some projects are ongoing, long term, while others are one-time events. Projects are approved by agents to meet local programming needs. Volunteers choose which projects they support.

MGEVs and agents/program assistants indicated that service requirements are reasonable expectations, but public responses were slightly less favorable. Overwhelming volunteer commitment was cited as the third reason people do not participate in the MGEV program. Data indicates that trainees can be better prepared for volunteer service.

When asked about volunteer service roles, projects that are ongoing have great appeal for existing MGEVs. Group and team projects are more desirable than those that are independent. This was different for the public respondents who indicated a stronger preference for independent activities and less interest in group or team projects. Public responses had higher scores for leadership roles than did current MGEVs. Projects that were one-time or short-term events had more appeal for public responders than current MGEVs. Existing volunteer roles were more favorable to public responders than MGEVs. There may be benefit to exploring different volunteer service models.

## SOCIAL ASPECTS

A major draw to the MGEV program is the connection with other people, such as other volunteers and Extension agents, program assistants, and specialists. Important relationships and a group and organizational dynamic are formed that are key to the continuity of the local program. In short, the social element of the MGEV program is a big part of why volunteers show up.

MGEVs indicated high willingness to participate to teach others about plants and gardening, followed closely by opportunities to interact with plants and value for relationships with other volunteers. Volunteer service opportunities involving other people were desirable, with only modest interest in independent project experiences. Volunteer:volunteer as well as volunteer:program coordinator connections are important to MGEVs. Agent/program assistants realize this, as do state-level and public responders. Opportunities to gather and interact in person should be prioritized during training and volunteer service.

## TECHNOLOGY

Use of technology in training reduces local redundancy and potentially boosts efficiency. It presents a much-needed opportunity to standardize the MGEV training experience and curriculum. Use of technology in programming allows expansion of current MGEV program capacity.

There was a large demand in both survey and discussion input for increased use of technology in every aspect of the MGEV program, from initial volunteer training to the delivery of educational programs for the public. It is not, however, a complete replacement for face-to-face programming and training. Connections and relationships between Extension personnel, volunteers, and Extension clientele remain essential for Extension's current community model.

Integration of technology into every aspect of the MGEV program will support Extension's response to public demand for social media and increased virtual programming, both of which

are critical to Extension’s future success. For example, distance diagnostic services by MGEVs extend support to Georgians regardless of geographic area. Virtual training and programming will necessitate well trained personnel equipped to build connections in such a setting.

## PROGRAM COORDINATION

Volunteer satisfaction is directly correlated with the length of time they serve and their intent to continue supporting the program. Several factors affect volunteer satisfaction, including their training experience and the local program coordinator’s actions to support volunteers. It is imperative that program coordinators are well versed in best practices for volunteer coordination.

MGEVs indicated a high level of satisfaction with their MGEV experience, more so than indicated by coordinators, state-level administration, and public responders. Agents and program assistants are willing to coordinate MGEV programs because it helps to meet demand for Consumer Horticulture (CH) information rather than the increased professional deliverables, such as the number of reportable activities a MGEV program generates.

Internal alignment between volunteers, county-level coordinators, state program specialists, and UGA Extension leadership is surprisingly positive, though there are opportunities for improvement. MGEV attitudes about personnel are favorable, but agent/program assistant and state administration responses reveal an opportunity to increase the state leadership’s familiarity with the program and its capacity. It remains important to connect the dots between Extension’s mission, the agent, and volunteers and their local associations, and to emphasize the value of working together.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Program accomplishments are measured in terms of outcomes, such as number of activities and volunteer service hours. MGEVs are trained to report data via a statewide system, MGLOG. Evaluation efforts are county-based and specific to an agent’s programming goals. There are no standardized evaluation tools currently used. There is a lack of awareness of what MGEVs do and their value to Extension programming.

Respondents at all levels indicated that the MGEV program increased Extension’s capacity to support consumer horticulture and offered benefits to Extension that it would not have otherwise. There is agreement that it is important to measure quality of MGEV educational outreach and that specific program impacts should be identifiable. Moderate interest in standardized evaluation tools was expressed, though willingness to use standardized tools was somewhat less.



## PUBLIC AWARENESS AND PROGRAM PROMOTION

Promotion of the Georgia MGEV Program is largely a county effort. Agents and Program Assistants are encouraged to promote their programs and accomplishments. State-level efforts are largely focused on the annual report and an occasional feature in college-level media.

Three top reasons for not participating in the MGEV program include time constraints, lack of program awareness, and an overwhelming volunteer commitment. Public participants in the listening processes were familiar with Extension but not with the MGEV program. A statewide social media campaign implemented locally, promotional materials for every county, and stories of MGEV impact were the top three recommendations for increasing public awareness of the MGEV program. It is important that the message behind the program logo fully communicates the services of MGEVs and the spirit of the program.

# MGEV PROGRAM STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026

<b>PRIORITY AREA</b> The key organizational and programmatic areas that must be addressed in order to accomplish the organization's mission in the next 5 years	<b>OUTCOME</b> The highest-level change that can be reasonably attributed to an organization or program	<b>STRATEGY</b> The high-level activities to accomplish the outcomes
<i>What are the essential priority areas on which our organization should focus over the next 3-5 years?</i>	<i>How will I know if the priority area has been adequately addressed?</i>	<i>What high-level programmatic or organizational activities should be implemented in order to accomplish outcomes?</i>
<b>Program Coordination</b>	Increase adoption of best practices for volunteer program coordination at the county level  Increase volunteer satisfaction with the MGEV experience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify necessary resources to support best practice implementation at county level.</li> <li>2. Use professional development opportunities (i.e., Program Update Day, Agent trainings, Winter Conference, District updates) to spotlight topics and skills identified by monitoring processes.</li> <li>3. Connect best practices to personnel activity reporting and public service promotion process</li> </ol>
<b>Volunteer Engagement</b>	Increase volunteer engagement in outreach efforts and the MGEV program  Increase volunteer satisfaction with the MGEV experience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify necessary resources to support consistent volunteer engagement at county level.</li> <li>2. Use continuing education opportunities (i.e., Regional Leadership Conferences, Thoughtful Thursdays) to spotlight topics and skills.</li> <li>3. Identify resources to increase leadership roles and volunteer retention.</li> </ol>

# MGEV PROGRAM STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026

**Marketing/Promotion**      Increase internal and external awareness of MGEV services and outreach opportunities

1. Create an annual plan for promotion at the college, state, and local level.
2. Create a marketing/promotion resource repository to provide resources for local use.
3. Adopt standardized program promotion at the county level.

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**Technology**      Support technology integration across all levels of the MGEV program

1. Refine virtual training tools for MGEVs.
2. Monitor technology needs and respective competencies of personnel and volunteers.
3. Extend professional development to personnel and volunteers in technology applications.
4. Identify technology-based volunteer service opportunities that can expand program capacity (i.e., distance diagnostics, public outreach and education).

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**Training**      Improve preparedness of volunteers for service as MGEVs

For all training levels (initial, continuing education, and advanced),

- monitor MGEV preparedness, confidence, and subject matter competencies.
- match training standards to current programming needs.

2. Increase annual continuing education requirement to 10 hours per year by 2023.



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