Supporting Volunteers in the Georgia Master Gardener Program

Results of an Evaluation

Conducted by:

Cassandra Drennon & Associates, Inc.

Submitted to:

Marco Fonseca

State Master Gardener Program Coordinator

University of Georgia

April 11, 2008

Evaluation Team

Cassandra Drennon & Associates, Inc.:

Diane Monaghan

Cassie Bryant

Victor Anderson

Emuel Aldridge

Introduction 4

Evaluation Questions 5

Data Collection 5

The Volunteer Survey 6

The CEA survey 9

Findings 12

Volunteer Participation Influencing Factors 12

Change Over Time 12

How Much Volunteers Participate 14

Attitudes of Active versus Inactive Volunteers 15

Support volunteers need from CEAs 18

Support CEAs need from State Master Gardener Coordinator 20

Current Levels of Support 20

Additional Support Needed 21

Best Practices: What is working well? 22

A Strong Volunteer Base 22

Local Leadership 22

Community Education & Beautification 22

Local & State Master Gardener Associations 22

Challenges: What is not working so well? 23

Challenges to Volunteer Participation 23

Challenges to Managing a Volunteer Program 23

Recommendations 24

Appendices 26

Introduction

The Master Gardener Program in Georgia began in 1979 to help cooperative extension agents “transfer research-based information about gardening and related subjects to the public by training home gardeners.”[1] Its mission is “to assist Cooperative Extension by training Master Gardeners to provide unbiased horticultural information through volunteer community service and educational gardening projects using applied research and the resources of the University of Georgia.”[2] The State Master Gardener Program Office of the Cooperative Extension Service at the University of Georgia administers the Master Gardener Program. The goals of the state Master Gardener office are:

- To assist Cooperative Extension Agents (CEAs) in their support of local Master Gardener Programs
- To provide guidelines and educational materials for use in the training, management, and utilization of Master Gardener Volunteers
- To promote horticultural education through the development of community outreach projects
-

Evaluation Questions

The following questions guided the evaluation:

1. What factors influence volunteer participation in the Master Gardener program?
   a. What motivated their initial involvement?
   b. What are the motivators for continued participation?
   c. What determines the number of hours they contribute?
2. What kind of support do volunteers need from CEAs to improve their participation?
   a. What are they receiving now?
   b. How effective is this support in encouraging volunteer participation?
   c. What support do volunteers need that they aren't getting?
3. What support do CEAs need from the Master Gardener coordinator to better manage and improve their Master Gardener programs?
   a. What are they receiving now?
   b. What do they need that they aren't getting?
4. What is working well in the Master Gardener programs? (best practices)
5. What is not working so well? (challenges)

Data Collection

We administered two online surveys, one to Master Gardeners (the "Volunteer Survey") and another to CEAs and Program Assistants (the "CEA Survey"), and conducted eight telephone interviews with selected volunteers. The surveys were designed with assistance from the state Master Gardener office, a Master Gardener volunteer, and a CEA who manages a Master Gardener program. Topic areas were chosen based on research about volunteering in Master Gardener programs[3] and the competencies required to manage a Master Gardener program adequately.[4] Rohs, Stribling, and Westerfield had previously considered the relative importance of demographics and personal benefits to determine what motivated volunteers in the

---

[3] Schrock, D. S., Meyer, M., Ascher, P., & Snyder, M. (2000). Benefits and values of the Master Gardener Program. *Journal of Extension*, *38*(1), Retrieved April 2, 2008, from http://www.joe.org/joe/2000february/rb2.html.

Wolford, M., Cox, K., & Kulp, K. III (2001). Effective motivators for Master Volunteer Program development. *Journal of Extension, 39*(2). Retrieved April 2, 2008, from http://www.joe.org/joe/2001april/rb4.html.

Rohs, F. R., Stribling, J. H., & Westerfield, R. R. (2002). What personally attracts volunteers to the Master Gardener Program? *Journal of Extension, 40*(4), Retrieved April 2, 2008, from http://www.joe.org/joe/2002august/rb5.shtml.

Boyd, B. L. (2004). Extension agents as administrators of volunteers: Competencies needed for the future. *Journal of Extension, 42*(2). Retrieved April 2, 2008, from http://www.joe.org/joe/2004april/a4.shtml.

[4] Boyd, B. L. (2004). Extension agents as administrators of volunteers: Competencies needed for the future. *Journal of Extension, 42*(2).

The state Master Gardener Office considered GAMGARDENER-L the most comprehensive contact list available for Master Gardeners at the time of this evaluation – the number of subscribers to the listserv roughly corresponded with the number of Master Gardeners that CEAs reported as active for the same period. However, for the purposes of drawing a scientific random sample, no accurate and complete list of Master Gardeners existed, according to staff at the State Master Gardener office.

Unable to draw a true random sample, we opted to survey as many Master Gardeners as possible. While the use of technology (i.e. the listserv and a web-based survey) maximized our opportunity to receive opinions on the Master Gardener program from as many volunteers as possible, this approach rendered the results vulnerable to two sources of error. First, coverage bias was introduced because, presumably, the listserv's reach was extended only to those with computer access and computer skills. Non-response bias was introduced if the characteristics of the Master Gardeners who chose to answer the survey were very different from those who chose not to.

As it turned out, highly active volunteers are disproportionately represented among the respondents. The majority (56%) report being certified for at least five years and contributing more than 50 hours per year to the program. Only 28 respondents (8%) fell into the "minimally involved" category.

How Master Gardeners Spend Their Time

- County Extension Office work
- Educational tours, demonstration gardens
- Civic, garden club presentations
- Children's programs
- Other community work

What They Like Most

- Educating the public
- Hands on community projects

Interviews

In follow up telephone interviews with eight survey respondents (four minimally involved and four highly involved), we asked for additional details on the Master Gardener experience – paying particular attention to their motivations for volunteering in the program as well as the support they received from their CEA and local Master Gardener Associations. Interviewees were selected from a list of survey respondents who, at the conclusion of he survey, provided their contact information. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Characteristics of the survey respondents, broken down by volunteer hours, are displayed in Table 1.

Demographic Category	All respondents 100% (340)	25 hours per year or less 8% (28)	25-49 hours per year 35% (120)	50 hours per year or more 56% (189)	Missing Data 1% (3)
Urban	14% (47)	18% (5)	12% (14)	14% (27)	33% (1)
TIME IN PROGRAM	n = 340	n = 28	n = 120	n = 189	n = 3
3 years	26% (87)	14% (4)	27% (32)	26% (50)	33% (1)
4 years	18% (63)	4% (1)	19% (23)	21% (39)	0%
5+ Years	**56% (190)**	**82% (23)**	**54% (65)**	**53% (100)**	**67% (2)**

Table 1

Question 2 on the survey asked volunteers if they had participated in a Master Gardener program in another state before coming to Georgia. Only 5% (n=17) responded “yes.”

The CEA survey

- Targeted all CEAs and PAs who facilitate Master Gardener programs in Georgia.
- Included 19 questions (six demographic questions, one question about Master Gardeners’ volunteer activities, three questions about how CEAs support Master Gardeners, one question about support CEAs need from the state program coordinator, one question about the quality and CEA management of the volunteer program, four questions about the quality of state support to CEAs, two essay questions about accomplishments and challenges, and one open-ended request for recommendations to improve the program).
- Took an average of 15 minutes to complete.

CEA Participants

From the state Master Gardener office we received a list of CEAs and PAs from counties with Master Gardener programs. On December 3, 2007, we sent out an invitation to 53 extension agents and PAs, asking them to participate in the CEA survey. Preceding our request on November 21, 2007, the State Master Gardener Coordinator emailed county extension offices describing the purpose of the survey and urging all agents with Master Gardener programs to respond. One week after the launch of the survey we sent out a reminder to CEAs, as did the State Coordinator. We received survey responses from 27 CEAs and 2 PAs representing 29 county extension offices – a response rate of 55%. Most agents who responded to the survey have run Master Gardener programs for six years or more (Figure 1) and, like the volunteer respondents, most were located in the northern part of the state (Table 2). Unlike the volunteers however, who were primarily suburban, more than half of CEAs (52%) described their service area as “rural or growing.” A third had programs with fewer than 20 members and a quarter had over 100 members; the membership of the remaining of programs fell somewhere in between.

Characteristics of Master Gardener Programs Served by CEA **N = 29**	
REGION SERVED	n = 28
NW GA	**43% (12)**
NE GA	36% (10)
SW GA	4% (1)
SE GA	18% (5)
POPULATION OF REGION SERVED	n = 29
Under 10,000	0%
10,000-50,000	**38% (11)**
50,000-100,000	24% (7)
Over 100,000	**38% (11)**
COMMUNITY SERVED	n = 27
Rural	0%
Rural/growing	**52% (14)**
Sub/exurban	30% (8)
Urban	18% (5)
# OF ACTIVE VOLUNTEERS	n = 29
Less than 20	**34% (10)**
20-50	21% (6)
50-100	21% (6)
Over 100	24% (7)

Table 2.

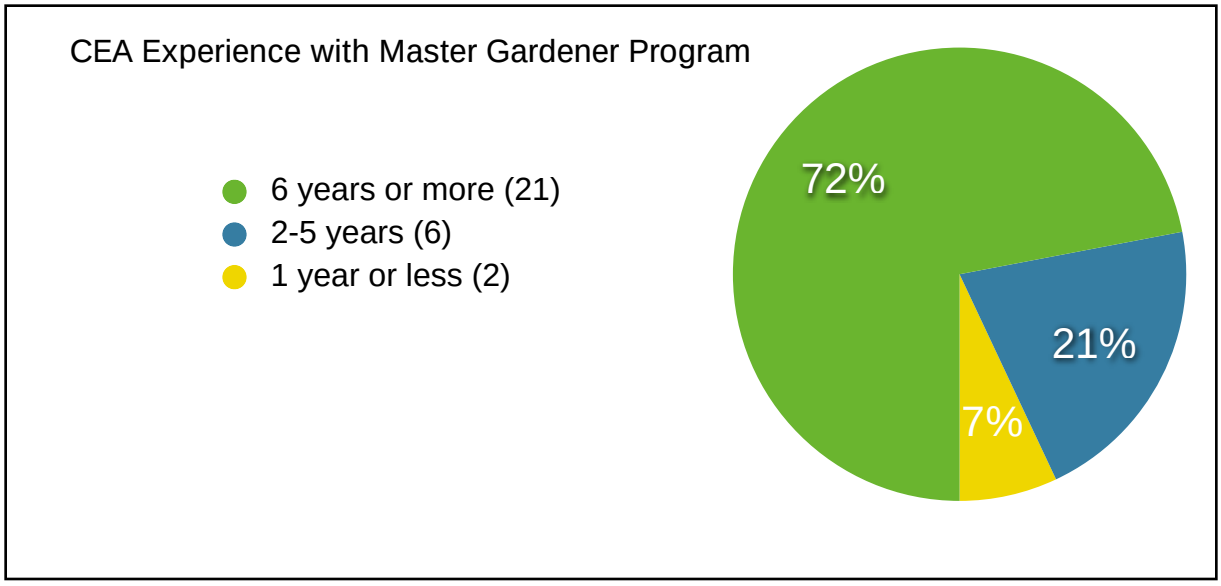

Figure 1.
Source: CEA Survey Q 8

Findings

similar increase over time in volunteers' desire to educate and serve the community. In these conversations, Master Gardeners continued to emphasize the importance of doing meaningful work. Surprisingly, lapsed Master Gardeners were most vocal about this. Three talked about being captivated with a community project, only to see the work lose momentum; a fourth said that her local program had turned away from a countywide focus and "began to function more like a small garden club than a community-minded organization." Although discouraged by these experiences, all four had found other ways to contribute to the community outside the Master Gardener program. Our findings suggest that In the six years since the Rohs, Stribling, and Westerfield study, motivations for serving as a Georgia Master Gardener have become more complex than the primary benefit of "status" reported in that study.

Fme0 0 0 -1sted in that study.

How Much Volunteers Participate

Respondents also rated the importance of nine factors to the amount of time they devote to the program (Figure 3), using the same five point scale. They considered “Other commitments in my life at the time,”“Quality of the training,” and “Good communication with the Master Gardener program,” as important factors in how many hours they spent on Master Gardener work. Least important, particularly to minimally involved volunteers, was the level of support their CEA provided. Highly involved volunteers, on the other hand, considered all the factors at least somewhat influential over their participation.

To learn if any of these factors was more important to one group than another, we compared responses between the two groups. Differences were statistically insignificant, except in the following area. **Finding: “Competing commitments” were significantly more important to less active volunteers than highly active ones.**

	Minimally Involved Volunteers		Highly Involved Volunteers				
Factor	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**			

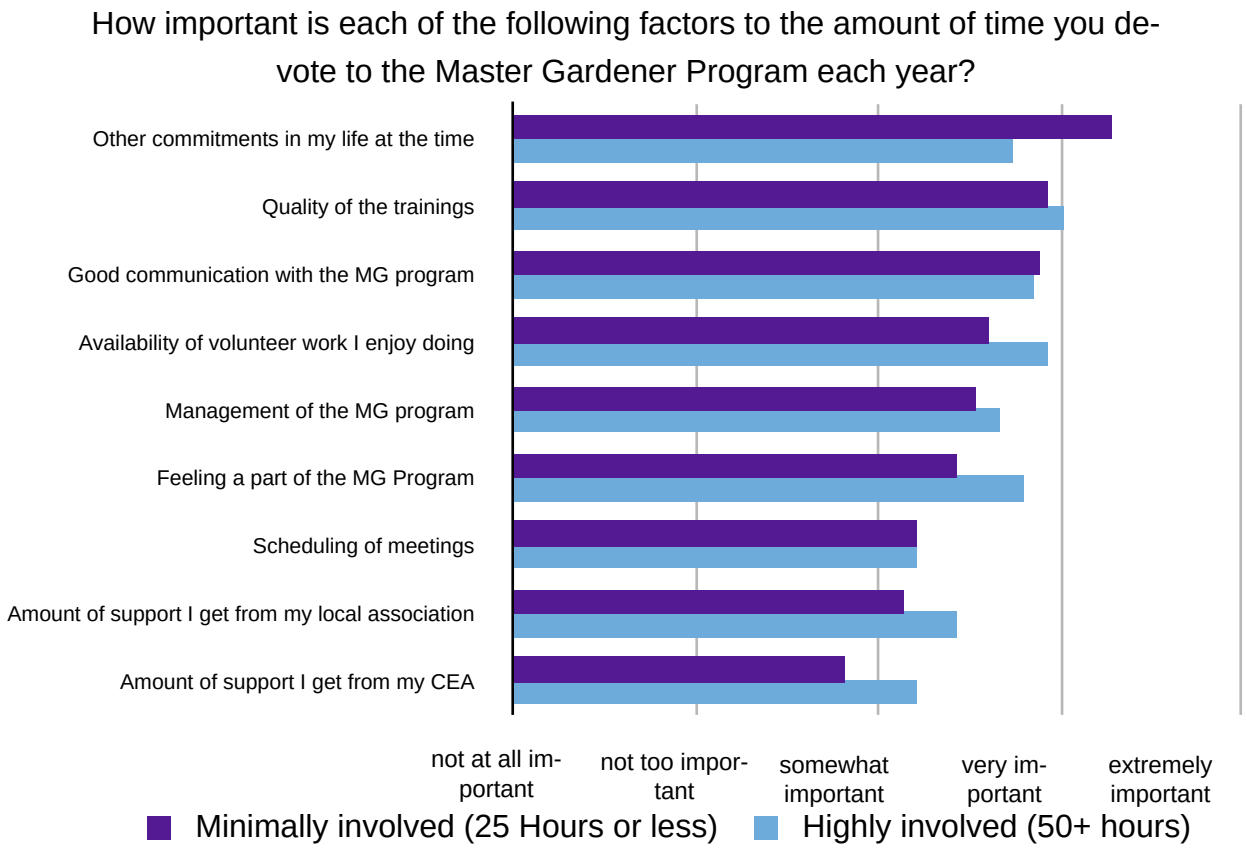

Figure 2
Source: Volunteer Q 13 & Q 14

Training, on the other hand, is a major factor that is within administrators' purview. Training Master Gardeners to educate the public is the mission of the Master Gardener program, and it is close to the hearts of volunteers. The quality of Master Gardener training, which most volunteers considered excellent, was the second most important factor in how much time they devoted to the program. CEA survey results reinforce the importance of quality training – agents said that they spent much of their time developing and delivering training to volunteers (Figure 5.) and they were confident that what they provided was effective. Nevertheless, many training-related comments from volunteers provided much constructive criticism. Improving the delivery and accessibility of training is an area worthy of attention from state and program administrators.

Volunteer Training Requests:

More training
- At more locations
- At more convenient times

Practical training
- Reinforced with hands on experience

Advanced training
- With a clear training path

Training material updates & more

Attitudes of Active versus Inactive Volunteers

To learn how satisfied volunteers were with their Master Gardener experience, we asked that they rate a series of 17 positive statements about the program

according to how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each. (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). All respondents agreed with these statements to some degree, and most felt emphatically that Master Gardening greatly benefits the community. When the scores of minimally and highly involved volunteers were compared, however, average scores revealed different levels of agreement (Figure 3). Overall, highly active volunteers were more positive than less active ones, and in four areas an independent-samples t-test determined that these differences were statistically significant (Table 4). **Finding: Highly involved Master Gardeners felt more strongly than their less active counterparts that volunteering offered a wide variety of volunteer opportunities from which to choose and gave them the opportunity to make full use of their expertise and talents. They were also more likely to say that they received praise and recognition for their volunteer work and had the opportunity to do the kind of work they wanted to do.**

	Minimally Involved Volunteers		Highly Involved Volunteers				
Positive Statement	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	**t**	**df**	**Sig. (2-tailed)**
MG offers a wide variety of volunteer opportunities to choose from	3.96	1.07	4.45	0.84	-2.77	211	0.006
I have the opportunity to use my expertise and talents	3.93	1.15	4.42	0.97	-2.42	215	0.016
I receive praise and recognition for my MG work	3.59	1.22	4.05	1.06	-2.05	207	0.041
I have the opportunity to do the volunteer work I want	4.07	1.02	4.57	0.79	-2.5	32.07	0.019

Table 4. P <.05

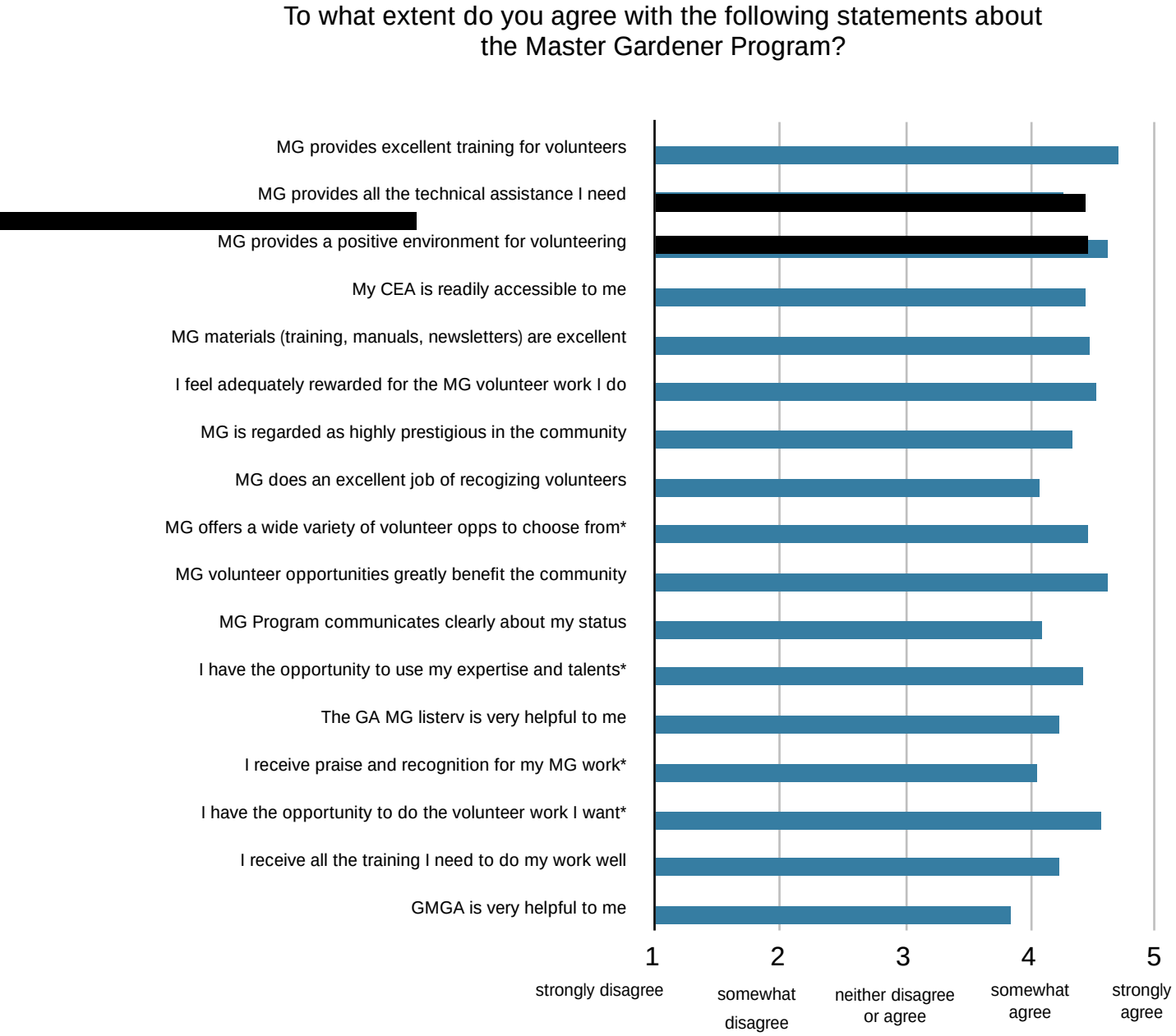

Figure 3

Source: Master Gardener Volunteer Survey Q 20 & 21

Support volunteers need from CEAs

The support that CEAs provide to Master Gardeners comes primarily through training and technical assistance. Volunteer respondents indicated that their CEA was readily accessible to them when they needed help. **Finding: Most often Master Gardeners contact the CEA for technical support for their projects. For other program information and support, they tend to go to their local association and other Master Gardeners.**

Although not asked specifically to do so, one in ten survey respondents took the initiative to tell us, sometimes spiritedly, about their CEA. Two-thirds of these comments were very positive, a third strongly negative. Combined, they describe the features Master Gardeners most value in a CEA. Master Gardeners praised agents and program assistants for their helpfulness, knowledge, and accessibility. “They are awesome and work very hard!” commented one, and another wrote, “He makes you feel important to the projects.” Negative comments described a very different agent, one with little interest in the program. Comments included: “rather unfriendly,” “unapproachable,” and “has an attitude.” Some complaints extended to more than one CEA. “[Our county} has unfortunately had a run of agents that have not been that interested in us as individuals or as a club,” shared one volunteer. This concern was reinforced in telephone follow-up interviews with volunteers, most of whom described negative experiences with one or more CEAs over their time in the program. The most common complaint was of inaccessibility, and we heard from several that their agents never came to meetings. “The agent should at least be present the first five minutes of the meeting or attend quarterly,” said one. Some respondents mentioned that CEA accessibility has improved for newer members because of the recently introduced requirement that Master Gardeners work in the extension office during their first year.

Volunteers would like the CEA to be more involved with their local association, asking specifically for help with infrastructure, planning, and recruiting. They also look to the CEA for guidance with conflict resolution. One Master Gardener suggested, “There needs to be a coordinated relationship between the CEA and the local association.”

CEAs evaluated their own performance according to the activities they carry out, using a five point scale (1 = not at all effective; 5 = extremely effective). On average, CEAs rated themselves most effective in the two areas where they spend the majority of their time: developing and providing volunteer training and providing technical support (M = 3.7 for each), followed by administrative (M = 3.6), recruiting volunteers (M = 3.5), and planning and supervising volunteer projects (M = 3.4). In all of these areas ding

Support CEAs need from State Master Gardener Coordinator

The role of the State Master Gardener Office has two facets: to promote the Master Gardener program and to provide support to CEAs who have Master Gardener programs. The State Program Coordinator describes CEA support as:

Coordinator in the area of conflict resolution. Although nearly half agreed somewhat that the state's liaison role was effective between CEAs and the UGA administration, only 31% agreed that the coordinator was effective in representing them to local associations.

Additional Support Needed

Finding: CEAs asked for more guidance and training in the management of the program and volunteers, with two suggesting that this be provided early in an agent's extension career. One CEA added that new agents need "realistic expectations for working with Master Gardener volunteers." Another asked for "a clear and consistent set of guidelines for program administration," and this was reinforced by the comment of a third, "Don't try to please everyone. Be decisive."

We asked what level of additional support CEAs needed from the state coordinator to carry out six activities. Choosing from a three point continuum ("no additional support is needed," "some additional support is needed," or "substantial support is needed") most agents (83%) indicated a need for additional or substantial state support to develop and provide volunteer training (Figure 6). One described a "critical need for more support in teaching classes for Master Gardener Class Series." The majority (72%) also wanted the state to provide more support for other activities, including evaluation and recognition of volunteers, administrative work, and recruitment. The only area where most agents (59%) did not see a need for further state support was with their planning and supervising of local projects. Three agents added comments asking for local autonomy in this area. As one put it, "Allow us to manage our Master Gardener volunteers as we need them – every county is different."

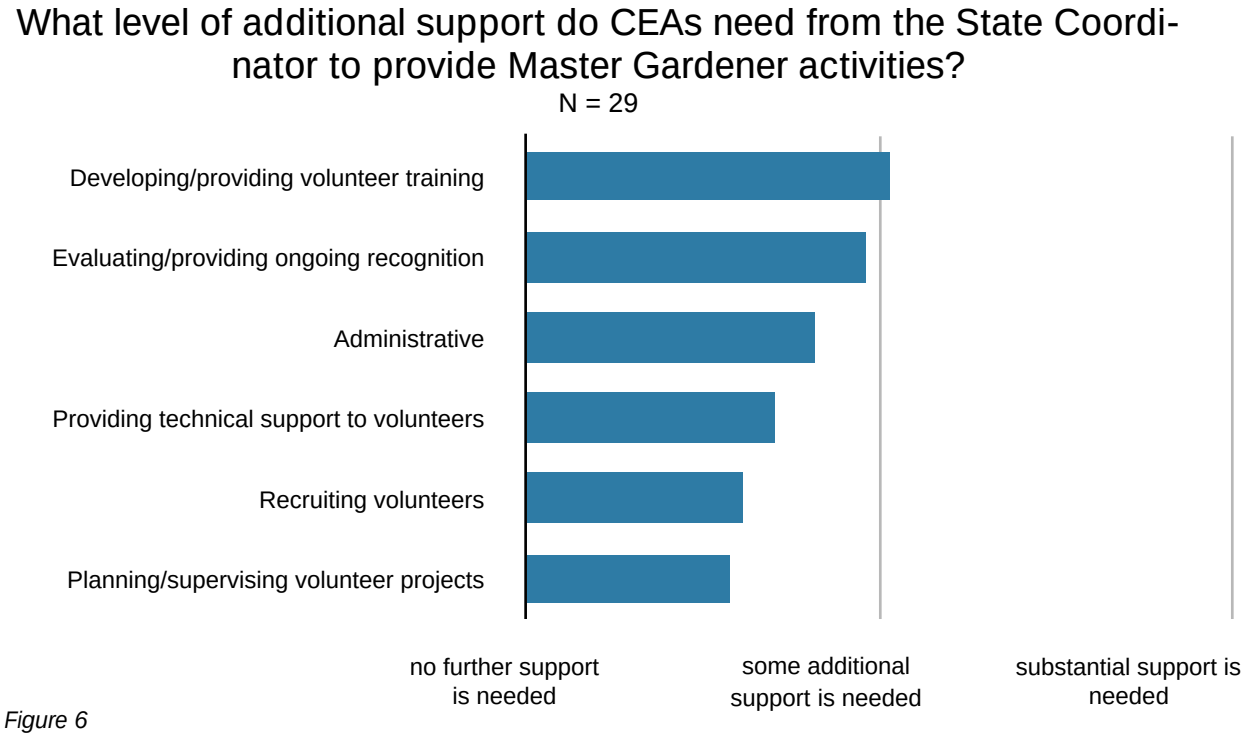

Figure 6
Source: CEA Survey Q11

Best Practices: What is working well?

Communities regard the Master Gardener Program as a highly prestigious organization, according to 93% of CEA respondents and 79% of volunteer respondents. Most Master Gardeners found the program to be a positive environment for volunteering, and CEAs felt strongly that Master Gardener volunteer work was of great benefit to the community and to the extension offices where they worked. The CEA survey asked agents to list the Master Gardener accomplishments of which they were particularly proud. Responses indicate what they find most valuable about their programs. These include:

A Strong Volunteer Base

- "30 lifetime volunteers"
- "Strong community of MG volunteers who are willing to tackle all kinds of projects, who are intelligent, caring, hard-working and responsible"
- "Large number of highly involved members" providing benefits to the county valued at $110,000

Local Leadership

- "Strong leadership base that provides leadership consistency through transition"
- "Major projects undertaken with Master Gardeners taking leadership"
- "Extremely high retention rate" attributed to "professional training, communication methods, and strong leadership"
- "Smooth transition from one CEA to another with the help of volunteers"

Community Education & Beautification

- "Lunch and Learn series"
- "Work with local schools"
- "Trial garden demonstration"
- "Landscaping Projects of highly visible areas around several public facilities"

"I love my association and enjoy every time we get together. I'm always learning when around anyone in the group."

Local & State Master Gardener Associations

Fully 83% of volunteer respondents belong to a local Master Gardener association. Just over half of those (55%) strongly agreed with the statement, "My local Master Gardener association is very helpful to me as a volunteer," and most indicated that support from the local association influenced the amount of time they devoted to the program. **Finding: Local associations are the first line of communication for most Master Gardeners – this is where they go to learn about volunteer**

opportunities and Master Gardener activities, to ask questions about their work, and to notify the program of their skills and interests. Several volunteers commented that the local association filled in gaps left by the extension office, particularly in areas where CEA involvement was minimal.

At the state level is the Georgia Master Gardener Association, Inc. (GMGA), an independently governed association that provides a statewide network for Master Gardeners. Although membership is not required to be a Master Gardener, 64% of respondents said they found the GMGA to be at least somewhat helpful to them in their volunteer work. Volunteers recommended that the state association play more of a role by hosting regional training, facilitating networking among local associations, and being more responsive to members.

Challenges: What is not working so well?

Challenges that emerged in the surveys and interviews reflected the two primary concerns of the evaluation, the tendency for volunteer participation levels to drop over time and the need to improve local program management. Most visible were leadership gaps that spanned the program's spectrum, reflecting a lack of initiative among volunteers, non-inclusive local associations run by a controlling few, and in some cases, minimal guidance from agents.

Challenges to Volunteer Participation

- Lack of project-work that engages volunteers
- Mismanagement of local associations, referred to as "cliquish" by several volunteers and agents, making it "hard for new members to feel welcome and appreciated"
- Lack of CEA involvement in some areas
- Geographical barriers to events and training
- No CEA assigned to some counties

Challenges to Managing a Volunteer Program

- Lack of guidelines and training for CEAs
- Conflict and frustration due to lack of clarity about the roles of volunteers, agents, and the state.
- Stagnant membership: a call for "new blood" and younger, more active recruits
- "Volunteer burnout"
- Ineffective reporting system, prompting under reporting of hours by some volunteers and lack of useful data provided to agents.

Recommendations

Although CEAs expressed a desire to administer their programs independently in response to local conditions, there was a consistent call for guidance and improvement in recruitment, retention, leadership, and management of volunteers. Guided by an analysis of volunteer and CEA responses as well as their suggestions for enhancing the Master Gardener experience, we offer the following recommendations to the state Master Gardener office.

Recruitment & Retention

- Promote a new, vital image of a Georgia Master Gardener and develop screening strategies to target a more proactive and diverse membership that reflects Master Gardeners' growing emphasis on community service.
- Involve volunteers directly in planning, development, and sustainability of local projects.

Training

- Restructure the volunteer training program – incorporate more hands-on learning
- Create an advanced training path that includes leadership development
- Provide a list of experts available to teach classes
- Make training more accessible to volunteers.

- Develop a structure for local associations that is democratic and inclusive, adding term limits for officers.
- Develop a system for timely recognition of volunteers at both the local and state level.
- Consider restructuring geographical service areas – combine resources among rural counties and decentralize large urban counties into smaller, more manageable community centers.
- Streamline the reporting system to encourage accurate reporting and make information more useful to CEAs.