In June of 2018, the URI Master Gardener Program Council created a new position - Operations Planning Coordinator - to oversee various program operations including vegetable and ornamentals propagation, poinsettia propagation, Gardening with the Masters Tour, East Farm MG greenhouse management and East Farm maintenance activities. What follows is a snapshot of accomplishments by activity for 2018.

2018 Highlights:

**Poinsettia Propagation Project (July - December)**

A total of 75 Master Gardener volunteers participated in the 2018 Poinsettia Propagation Project under the leadership of Kathleen Larson. As has been the case for many years, this project started in July 2018 with the arrival of more than 2,200 tiny poinsettia plugs that were nurtured, measured and studied for the growers who donated the plants to URI.

Unlike many MGP projects, the poinsettia project very labor-intensive, as a different work crew has to tend to the plants daily. Seven days a week from July to December, to be exact. The poinsettia crews must periodically measure the plants, be wary of pests and combat them as necessary. Tiny wasps and beetles, purchased to combat any pests, are used instead of pesticides. Once the plants turn color, volunteers lists the pros and cons of each variety as field notes to submit to the growers who donated the plants to URI.

With the great number of plants provided in 2018, the poinsettia volunteers held the first public sale in many years at which time they had the opportunity to educate buyers on how to tend to the plants. Over 2,000 poinsettias were sold to Master Gardener volunteers, URI staff and the general public in 2018. This year’s sale was so successful that only 99 plants were left after the two-day sale and they were donated to nursing facilities!

*The plant sale resulting from this project helps to fund other MGP projects and activities throughout the year.*

**Ornamental Propagation Project (January - May 2018)**

Marylee Goodwin and Susan Cerullo, project chairs, report that their team of MGs chalked up another successful year growing ornamentals for various demonstration gardens and also for the annual Spring Plant Sale. This year, a “native plant system” a.k.a. “garden in a box” was developed to encourage the use of native plants that provide food for beneficial insects, birds and other wildlife. In addition, a “URI Master Gardener Program Plant of the Year”, selected by volunteers through a survey poll, was selected to raise awareness about functional native plants. In 2018, the Cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), a Rhode Island native plant, was selected as a hummingbird and butterfly host.
The MG crew for the ornamentals propagation project numbered 102 volunteers in 2018. There is a crew for each day of the week, starting in January and extending through the Spring Plant Sale in May which was a huge success. Crews work three hours each day; and the plan is to attract interns from the class of 2019. As is the case every year, new MGs to the project are given a greenhouse orientation at the start of the growing season and periodic lessons on seed starting and plant maintenance.

The plant sale resulting from this project helps to fund other MGP projects and activities throughout the year.

**Vegetable Propagation Project**

Valerie Wharton and Sue Scotti were the project leaders once again and led close to 100 MGs in raising vegetable plants and herbs. The vegetable propagation project involved a lot of education especially with interns; and interns from the Class of 2019 will be recruited to assist with the 2019 sale. Information covered during continuing education sessions included integrated pest management, transplanting of plants and plugs, propagation best practices, watering, pruning, grafting and pinching. Seed starting classes were held for both MGs and individuals who obtained free seed program donations for school and community garden projects.

In 2018, greater use of biologics was incorporated into the vegetable propagation project to prevent problems. The veggie team also started raising pollinator-supporting plants. The team continued to expand grafting, including eggplants in 2018. Orders for school gardens were changed to include more mixed plant, color and variety six-packs. With increased training, donation pickups went smoother. The vegetable propagation project operation (as well as ornamentals) will be able to use the new hardening-off house that was built by Rudi’s Rangers. This facility, 92’ by 17’, replaces the troublesome hardening off modules that were used for years.

The plant sale resulting from this project helps to fund other MGP projects and activities throughout the year.

**Gardening with the Master’s Tour**

Because the garden tour is held every other year, there was no tour in 2018; but Mary Ann Buckley, coordinator of the tour, reports that planning for the 2019 tour is well under way. A total of 26 gardens will be on display June 29th and 30th, 2019; and an attempt is being made to group gardens in clusters so travel is minimized for tour participants. Another change this time was to set up teams of garden evaluators to visit the gardens to see what themes will be in place and to determine accessibility and other factors at each site.
Efforts were made to solicit garden center sponsors to offset the cost of printing the booklets which serve as “tickets” to the tour. This time, a system has been devised for people to buy the tickets electronically.

*The biennial Gardening with the Master’s Tour helps fund other MGP projects and activities throughout the year.*

**Agricultural Experiment Station Maintenance**

Every year it seems to get busier keeping East Farm operating smoothly and meeting the requests of various MGP projects. The work falls on the shoulders of Rudi’s Rangers, a support group of about 25 MGs and honorary MGs who work two mornings a week, year-round. Rudi Hempe and Chuck Dawson are the project leaders.

It is estimated that about 60% of the tasks involved are in support of East Farm where the MGP has full access to URI’s buildings, grounds and equipment. The rest of the workload involves MGP project support. Because of the increasing workload, Rangers added 6 new workers in 2018, including one with farming experience and another with shop teaching experience. It is imperative that the Rangers continue to attract people with certain skills.

The Rangers work closely with Dr. Steven Alm, an entomologist, whose current research involves pollinators and pollination plants. Rangers help build devices for the research and are continuing to develop the area known as Five Acre Field which is being turned into a pollination meadow. Two large raised beds were rehabbed by Rangers for growing pollination plants. This research project and the one involving American chestnuts are regularly addressed by the Rangers.

Rangers also perform routine maintenance on tractors, mowers and other machines at East Farm. A fully-equipped workshop is used to build and repair things. A group of Rangers routinely mows much of the farm except for the section around the pond. Rangers routinely provide traffic control and transportation for URMGP events such as the seed sort and plant sale. In the winter, Rangers do snow removal in areas not addressed by URI facilities.

Of course, a main responsibility for the Rangers is to make sure the greenhouses are maintained in good operating condition. In 2018, the Ornamental Greenhouse was added to the workload. This greenhouse is a shared facility including some MGP operations. A major project in 2018 was the construction of a 92x17-foot cold frame, which will be used to harden off ornamental and vegetable plants for MGP community and school gardens and also the annual plant sale.

In 2018, a new event was started – URI Farms Open House. The purpose of this event was to showcase the research, teaching and outreach that takes place at URI’s Agriculture Experiment Stations including East Farm, Peckham Farm and the Gardiner Crops Research Station. This included many URI Master Gardener Program demonstration gardens, faculty
research plots, 4-H operations and more. Families were invited to sample crop varieties, interact with farm animals, tour the greenhouses and learn about growing healthy food. This event was very successful in its first year and drew a few hundred people. It probably will be held periodically.

In 2018, Rangers also did work off site such as building a pergola at the Kettle Pond Project. In 2019, Rangers will be erecting a new greenhouse for the RI Veterans Home in Bristol through a $95,000 Champlin grant provided through the Master Gardener Foundation of RI, Inc.

Besides doing tasks for MGP projects, Rangers also repaired fences, did interior work in Building 50 (shellfish research), built a new staircase for Building 75, cleared fallen trees, installed stormwater devices and repaired fencing and eroded roadways. It’s not all work and no play for the Rangers. In 2018, they held a hamburger/hot dog roast, a lobster cook-off and took part in two field trips.

**East Farm Greenhouses**

Our two URIMGP greenhouses, Hempe and Garcia, continue to provide a quality environment for raising thousands of vegetable and ornamental plants that are sold to the public and supplied to scores of community and school gardens throughout the state. As is the case every year, the greenhouses “employ” the greatest number of MG volunteers of all projects. David Newton, greenhouse manager, reports that 820 MGs worked in the greenhouses in 2018, which includes volunteers on all the project mentioned herein, in addition to the 2018 Free Seed Program, which operated out of the greenhouse space and contributed hundreds of additional volunteers to the tally.

While growing plants is the primary activity, volunteers also undergo considerable training sessions to learn more about the do’s and don’ts involved in greenhouse propagation. One of the key goals each year is to maintain strict cleanliness in both houses to minimize pest and disease problems. In 2018, Newton instituted a two-day strategy to prepare the houses for propagation. This year, power washing and leaf blowing machines were used to prepare the houses after every crop growing season and the results were no white fly issues.

Plastic shelving was added to Garcia for more storage space and the same is being eyed for Hempe House in 2019. Horizontal Air Flow (HAF) fans, which are used to distribute heat evenly in each house, were taken down and cleaned. Some of the older ones will be replaced in 2019.

One new facility that was added in 2018 was a large cold frame that is replacing the hardening off modules that were in use for many years. More details on this facility is included in the East Farm Maintenance report below.