Free Seed Program

The URI Master Gardener Program once again partnered with Ocean State Job Lot Charitable Foundation to give away unused packets of vegetable, flower and herb seeds to schools, libraries and nonprofit organizations. 2019 was a busy year as 1702 seed orders were filled, 810 of them were from Rhode Island, and a total of 174,311 packages distributed to 49 states!

This year the program was expanded to ship to any state. 49 states ordered and the farthest package was shipped to Alaska. Each year the program becomes more popular and seeds are also distributed at events around the state. As a result, there was an increase of more people growing their own food with information provided through these events. During the seed distribution day, a talk was given to the public on seed starting to help with successful germination. Ocean State Job Lot and URI Cooperative Extension teamed up to film the entire operation to capture the impact the Free Seed Program has on the community as the program distributes to community gardens, schools, libraries, community centers, 4-H clubs, and more.

Some reasons people requested seeds were to grow more healthy food for families, community gardens, schools and food pantries. It also helped provide low-income families with sufficient food, as well as beautify neighborhoods. One individual responded that it was a great learning activity for Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H clubs, Future Farmers of America and Junior Master Gardeners. The Free Seed Program was also life enrichment for the sick, disabled, elderly and veterans.

Additionally, 40 libraries from urban and rural areas requested seeds, which were hand delivered by Master Gardener (MG) volunteers. Libraries distributed seeds in displays which included gardening books, Master Gardener literature and seed catalogues organized by category. A few libraries had informational kiosks on Saturdays, in which a MG was present to answer any questions. This collaboration with libraries is another way the URIMGP is able to distribute resources within the community.

Gardening and Environmental Hotline

The URI Gardening & Environmental Hotline is an important educational service offered to the community and a foundation of a Master Gardener Programs nationally. URI Master Gardeners distribute hotline business cards to encourage the public to call, email and stop in to have their questions answered. The Hotline also has a separate area in the Mallon Center where the public
can bring in soil samples to have texture and pH testing. The Hotline is open at the Mallon Center from the beginning of March until the end of October. Then from November to March, there is a dedicated group of 6 volunteers that answer only email inquiries during the colder season.

This year 1127 emails and 694 phone calls were answered by the volunteers. 175 people walked in with questions and 264 walked in with soil samples, in which a total of 613 tests were completed. There has been a good increase from last year in the amount of emails that are being received; and this appears to be the preferred method of communication with twice the number of emails as compared with phone calls. The amount of soil test walk-ins doubled from last year and actual number of soil tests performed tripled from 2018. This demonstrates the impact that the program is having on the community seeking our services. Many people have indicated that they have found our information helpful and would seek out our services on the Hotline again. In fact, we do have many callers who indicate they are repeat callers. It was busiest with phone calls from April through July, emails were busiest April through September, while soil testing was busiest in the month of April.

There was a broad range of questions addressed, from tree and insect identification, grape pruning, how to ship a cactus, questions on beekeeping and more. In March the focus of questions were on lawns and ornamentals, such as what type of fertilizer to use, how much lime to apply and lawn renovation. Individuals also wanted to know about specific types of grasses and how to grow them. April saw a lot of questions on lawn and on how to get rid of bamboo, Rosa Multiflora and Zoysia. July saw more questions on poison ivy and hydrangeas. August had many questions on tomatoes, bees, wasps, peaches, and vegetable gardening. While some questions were general, others were very specific. For example:

Q: What to do if a 12x6 high clay pot & plastic pot are stuck together?
A: Heat the clay pot with hot water and use a screwdriver to pry apart.

Q: How small are nematodes?
A: 1/500 of inch in diameter, 1/20 inch length

Q: Can I use denatonium Benzoate to induce deer resistance?
A: It is a bettering agent to prevent ingesting of harmful products in young children. It is suitable only for use in ornamental plants and not edibles.

Hotliners are prepared to give information and direct people to resources that can answer their questions. Sometimes callers just want confirmation that they are handling the situation correctly. No day or call is ever the same. This year, The Providence Journal published an article about the Gardening and Environmental Hotline, which demonstrated the great services that are provided free of charge to the public.

**Master Gardener Kiosks**

Of all educational services, this is the venue for reaching the greatest amount of people with educational information. This year 52 events educated a grand total of 4208 attendees. The two biggest events the kiosk was a part of were the Rhode Island Builders Home and Garden Show in early April and the Attleboro Flower Show in March.

Good listening and communication skills are developed when working kiosk events. In general, there are many people living in areas with small gardening space, so there has been great interest in container gardening and intensive gardening. Volunteers offer an array of written literature (handouts) on topics including a RI planting calendar for fruits and vegetables, along with free seeds which people request and find very helpful in when to plant. URI Master Gardeners obtain the most satisfaction when people leave the kiosk with an action plan in mind. Beginning gardeners are encouraged to start at a manageable level, such as starting a container garden on the deck and beginning with herbs and a few vegetables.

Many people are also interested in pollinators. The 2019 URI Master Gardener Plant of the Year, Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), is used as an educational highlight since it is a host plant to butterflies and has high nectar value for butterflies, bees and beneficial insects. This leads to further conversation of pollinator conservation techniques including encouraging the selection of native plants.

At Highlander Charter School, children planted and took home a bean or pea plant along with instructions on care. The children were very excited about learning and understanding where their food comes from. This further involved the parents taking seed packets which helps low income families grow their own food. Volunteers provided literature in Spanish and a Spanish speaking MG was available to assist in making the kiosk more user-friendly and encouraging more people to approach with questions. Once again, this educational service was successful in bringing communities together.

A two-day Earth Day event at Roger Williams Zoo saw a very large group of children of all ages with parents visiting our kiosk. There was a pollinator activity in which the children were asked to identify and color on a mural or rock a pollinator of their choice. They could also take free seeds and this helped make the connection that pollinators are important for growing our food. Whenever you teach children, you are also engaging parents at the same time.
2019 EDUCATIONAL SERVICES REPORT
Compiled by Stephanie Serino, Educational Services Coordinator

Awareness is key. Offering information, and instruction makes people more aware and awareness creates action. The more you see and hear helps you identify what to plant and where.

At Burlingame State Park Wellness Day there was a great response from children and their parents. One group of 4 teenage boys picked out seeds and then spent 30 mins inquiring about how to grow them and even what was the best pH for each plant. Volunteers focus on all the senses, especially tactile, in which we found children were hugging a mum plant we had on display and feeling the gourds used to weigh down the literature on the table while MGs discussed planting with the parents. This encourages and develops use of the senses.

We also helped create awareness of the Spotted Lanternfly which is a harmful insect that uses 40 different host plants. This is a pest that has not been found in Rhode Island, thus raising awareness will hopefully allow us to detect it early and respond rapidly.

The MG kiosk was invited to many Wellness Day Kiosk events at large companies such as Metlife and Amica. People there have relayed that gardening gives a new appreciation for nature, especially when learning about pollinators. Gardening has stimulated new interests in learning about botany, nutrition and landscape design. When talking about vegetable gardening, many people express interest in growing their own food as a way to reduce the amount of pesticides on your food. Master Gardeners help develop healthier approaches to life and the environment around us.

Public Presentations

Master Gardener volunteers disseminate science-based information through public presentation on various topics given by 62 speakers. This year there was a total of 79 presentations with 2,359 people attending. The topics ranged from Flower Pressing to Vegetable Gardening. The most requested topic was Native Perennials and Sustainable Gardens. The second most popular topic was Container Gardening, while Seed Starting was also another popular topic. Presentations were given at libraries, garden clubs, businesses and schools. For instance, five programs were held at Brown University while three were held at Blue Cross Blue Shield this year.

March, April and May are the most popular months for presentations since people are anxious to start gardening after the winter season. New programs were held this year at Cranston Public Library and the Providence Public Library. A Spanish Container Gardening presentation was given, along with Spanish resources and soil pH testing materials. This program was given at the Lincoln School twice, and excellent feedback was given by the director of the Spanish program:
“(URI Master Gardener) came to Lincoln School this past Tuesday to share with us her ample knowledge about Gardening. You could not have chosen a better person to teach us about this environmental activity. She was professional, energetic, fun, clear, inspirational, and a fantastic teacher for all of us. Thank you.”

The program obtains the most direct feedback in the form of thank you letters and donations to the URIMGP. Some people find it surprising that we provide such quality programs free of charge.

“A master gardener came to talk with the Harbour Island garden group in Narragansett last month. She was an awesome speaker and educator. Our garden group is still talking about how wonderful she was and how we so enjoyed it. It was delightful for the master gardener speakers to send us such an amazing speaker. Thank you so much.”

The goal of these public presentations is to educate people and inspire them to try something new. Gardeners are encouraging people to think differently and explore new options.

Soil Testing

Soil pH testing is an essential service that is provided throughout the state. Many volunteers refer people to soil testing since proper pH levels are important as it affects the availability of nutrients to the plants. For the first time, the Soil pH Testing brochure was provided in Spanish, which enabled the program to reach a broader group of individuals. This year, 1087 clients were serviced and 2210 soil tests were performed at various locations.

There were nine permanent sites and many other scheduled events at locations such as Home Depot, local nurseries, farmer markets and schools. This year, two new permanent locations were established at Goddard Park Farmers Market in East Greenwich and at Attleboro Farmers Market in Massachusetts. At these events, soil texture and pH tests were performed on-site by experienced MG volunteers. In addition to that, information on soil amendments, fertilizers and lawn management were also provided to clients. For example, pH levels are usually low in Rhode Island, so proper instructions on lime application is needed. Since some acid-loving plants perform better with lower pH levels, it was important that soil testers determined what the client was attempting to grow, as well as the ideal pH level for that specific plant.

As a result of these soil tests, clients have seen improvements in their gardens as they have changed their practices on fertilizing and lawn treatments. MG volunteers often receive grateful feedback from clients who return each year for soil tests.
Appendix I. Gardening and Environmental Hotline

![2019 Hotline Totals Chart]

Appendix II. Public Presentations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Total Presentations</th>
<th>79</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Attendees</td>
<td>2,359</td>
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<td>Total Speakers</td>
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<td>Schools</td>
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*Includes Brown University (5) and Blue Cross/Blue Shield (3)
Appendix III. Public Presentations

Appendix IV. Soil pH Testing