2019 marked the second year of the Master Gardener Program (MGP) council position, Operations Planning Coordinator, which includes oversight of the following projects: vegetable propagation, ornamental propagation, garden tour, poinsettia propagation and East Farm Agricultural Experiment Station maintenance. For all intents and purposes, 2019 was a resounding success in all areas.

**PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS:**

**Ornamental Propagation Project**

Whereas this project in the past ran from January until May each year, 2019 marked a departure from that schedule as it is now a year-round endeavor because of Susan Cerullo and Marylee Goodwin’s efforts to start a project on raising perennials from seed. The concept behind Susan’s and Marylee’s effort is to develop a continual supply of perennial plants, which can be offered in addition to the annuals that are raised each year.

The perennial project was initiated in the Ornamental Greenhouse Building 97A (formerly known as the Brian Maynard Greenhouse), which is a joint-use facility involving graduate student and faculty research projects, Rhody Native propagation, undergraduate projects as well as Master Gardener projects. This facility was upgraded in 2019.

The ornamental highlight each year is the URI Spring Festival. About 97 Master Gardener (MG) volunteers work on this project for three hours daily from the depths of winter until May. Besides the thousands of plants sold to the public, the ornamental crews grew 568 perennials and donated the plants to 24 MGP demonstration gardens. The “garden in a box” native plant system, featuring drought-tolerant pollinator plants, was a big hit and also were the 50 *asclepias incanata* “plant of the year” sold.

Ornamental plant crews included many “veterans” plus interns from the 2019 class. Weekly training sessions were also held. For the future, there is a need for more volunteers, especially since this operation is spread among five different locations.

**Vegetable Propagation Project**

2019 marked a transition in this project as new leaders were trained. The veggie crew numbered 109 MGs; and they raised more than 8,000 plants for 82 school garden projects throughout the state, as well as thousands of plants for the URI Spring Festival. In addition, they provided handouts for plant purchasers, participated in the Ocean State Job Lot video (OSJL provides thousands of seed packets each year for distribution), taped two Plant Pro segments for NBC10, taught two seed starting classes, conducted the Comprehensive Community Action Program to help a greenhouse setup in Cranston, and provided greenhouse tours.
In-house education was provided through mini classes on plant transplanting and plug planting, greenhouse cleanliness, pruning and grafting, IPM, low-dose (or no-dose) pesticides, and disease-resistant and drought-resistant plants.

The veggie project expanded markedly in 2019 with the use of a new hardening-off house and the Ornamental House, both at East Farm, as well as the use of the greenhouses on the main campus. Because of the expanded number of locations, there is a need for a larger cadre of volunteers. For 2020, better rodent control is needed and some operational changes may be necessary if the trend of wet and cool springs continues.

**Gardening with the Masters Tour**

This tour, held every two years, was a resounding success with 26 gardens on view, in which 14 of them were new to the tour. Mary Ann Buckley, coordinator, says that an attempt was made this year to “cluster” the gardens to make it easier for visitors. There were 6 gardens in the southern area, 9 in the central area, 6 in the eastern area and 5 in the northern area. Nine MG volunteers visited the gardens prior to enlisting them into the tour; and a tour committee prepared information on each garden for a guidebook. Five nurseries provided sponsorships for the guidebook, greatly offsetting the cost of printing. Some 900 guidebooks, which serve as tickets to the two-day event (June 29 & 30) were sold and the weather cooperated. Proceeds from the tour are used to support educational activities throughout the state.

**Poinsettia Propagation**

This long-lived project was a resounding success with 43 varieties offered to Master Gardeners, URI workers and the general public. Kathy Larson headed up a crew of 75 Master Gardeners who utilized two greenhouses at East Farm.

The project started in mid-July with 1,848 cuttings provided by growers. 100 of these were provided to Dr. Brian Maynard for his horticulture class. Of the total, 254 plants were sold in bulk, six were provided to the URI President’s House and, while final figures still must be calculated, it is estimated that 1,300 plants were sold to Master Gardeners and the public. When the dust settled, there were 93 plants left unsold; and they were provided to libraries, senior assistance organizations, the state veteran’s home and a number of charitable institutions.

Kathy reported that while the sale days for MGs and URI personnel were slow, the public sale was highly successful as many customers were pleased with the variety of plants and the $10
cost. Some aspects to consider in 2020 are improved sale guidelines, earlier signage and more cleanup help. On the other hand, publicity was well done and the daily MG crews were exemplary. Rangers provided parking and transportation assistance for purchasers.

A new trial was part of the project this year. As in the past, the Garcia House was fitted with grow lights; but this year an experimental new type of light was added to one bench. The grow lights are needed in this house because of shade cast by nearby towering oak trees. For 2020, an effort will be made to remove some of the trees to eliminate the shadows.

The new grow light that was tested was provided by PowerTrak Efficiency Systems of Bristol. It features a lightweight rack of LED strips with different wavelengths. The whole array uses just 80 watts and produces no heat, whereas the old grow lights each use 400 watts and produce lots of heat. Kathy noted that the bench with the new LED array seemed to promote faster growth. She had one variety of poinsettias that was not doing well, but when moved to the LED-lighted bench they recovered very well. The LED system costs $400 and to convert all 10 benches would be expensive. So the jury is still out — if the tree removal can be accomplished, grow lights in Garcia may not be needed at all. On the other hand, LED grow lights appear to be the wave of the future for growers.

**East Farm Agricultural Experiment Maintenance Project**

The maintenance group, dubbed Rudi’s Rangers, expanded its ranks during the year and continued to provide maintenance to various facilities at East Farm and elsewhere.

A system of tallying hours logged by Rangers doing work at the farm (excluding MG projects) showed that from January through October, Rangers registered 2,942 volunteer hours on East Farm tasks. Using the IRS-established rate for volunteer hours in Rhode Island ($26.82 per hour), that means the Rangers contributed $78,904.44 worth of labor for that period. Needless to say, this is a significant contribution made by MGs toward the upkeep of the East Farm Agricultural Experiment Station.

Among the tasks that Rangers completed at East Farm in 2019 are: pole barn cleanup, blueberry netting, parking duty, pollination meadow expansion and maintenance, Building 14 landscaping, Wild Plant Society Sale setup and take-down, orchard mowing,
interior renovation in Building 50, planting 25 apple trees, planting 25 blueberry bushes, bee research participation (hive maintenance, construction, relocation), snow plowing, erosion control, mower maintenance, tractor maintenance, grape vine arbor restoration, and wood chip operations. A new bee research think tank has been established with Dr. Steven Alm, entomologist, along with several Rangers, faculty and graduate students.

Offsite, Rangers provided labor at the RI Veterans Home, the ongoing American Chestnut Restoration Research Project, the URI Botanical Garden, parking and setup work at the annual Plant Sale, installation of the Roseanne Sherry memorial, the annual seed sort setup and take-down, and greenhouse consultation at three school garden sites.

On the social side, two breakfasts and one cookout were held. Rangers lost two members through death (Jeff Mead and Dick Perreault) and two long-time members moved out of state (Gordon Jones and Gordon Mahan).

Both the Garcia (97D) and Hempe (97C) greenhouses functioned well in 2019. The natural gas heating system performed without problems. In 2020, the Hempe House is scheduled for a new plastic skin and perhaps a new floor covering. This work will be completed after the May plant sale.

The new hardening-off house (no utilities) performed as expected in 2019; but the greenhouse crews have requested short “bunny” gates at the two doorways to prevent rabbits and other critters from entering when the doors are open. Mice can still be a problem; however mouse traps are used in all three houses.

In 2019, a $7500 grant was received by the Master Gardener Foundation of Rhode Island to upgrade the electrical system in the Ornamental Greenhouse (97A). The electrical work was performed by a licensed firm and came in under budget. This house was cited in the past by URI safety personnel for electrical deficiencies. That has been addressed and a control system, identical to those in Hempe and Garcia, is now in place.