

2017 Search for Excellence Application – URI Master Gardener Program

***Name of MG Program:**

University of Rhode Island Master Gardener Program, Rhode Island (statewide)

***Name, address, phone and email of MG volunteer contact person**

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***Name, title, address, phone, email of MG coordinator / staff person**

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***Category:** Youth

***Name of Project: Catherine Desourdy School Garden Mentor Program**

***Description of project. Include target audience, goals, location and partnerships**

The Catherine Desourdy School Garden Mentor Program (SGM) is a program of University of Rhode Island Master Gardener Program (URIMGP) based at the URI Extension Outreach Center. The goal of the SGM Program is to help Rhode Island and surrounding area schools provide relevant learning environments to foster deeper understanding of natural sciences, food systems, environmental stewardship and other STEAM concepts. The SGM Program is a free service. Schools are provided with a team of one- two certified URI Extension Master Gardener volunteers who have each completed additional training to qualify as a School Garden Mentor (SGM). Their mission is to assist the school in determining and reaching its own gardening goals, to facilitate year-to-year gardening continuity and to be the on-going conduit for science-based gardening advice and the many free resources available through URI Cooperative Extension.

This program was envisioned and created in 2009 to honor the legacy of a dedicated URI Master Gardener and fulfill a pressing need in the community. Catherine Desourdy was a URI Master Gardener leader with a passion for youth gardening and education, contributing over 6000 volunteer hours to the program over a period of seven years. After Catherine Desourdy's death in 2008, her family made a bequest to URI Master Gardeners that formed the basis of an endowment whose purpose was to connect youth to gardening. In 2010, a pilot program was developed to train URI Master Gardeners to provide technical guidance to the teachers, administrators and parents that make up the local school garden community. From the initial group of 9 schools at the end of 2010, the program has grown today to include 38 individual school partnerships that affect the daily lives and education of over 12,500 Rhode Island and Massachusetts school-aged children and 550 adults.

The goal of the Catherine Desourdy School Garden Mentor Program is clear and forthright: to provide support to school gardeners that educate children in how healthy, nutritious food is grown, the role of pollinators and beneficial insects, safe food-handling practices, the importance of vegetables to a healthy diet and other good gardening practices. Participating public and private schools include pre-kindergarten and day care sites, elementary, middle and high schools with gardens that range from a single pallet garden, to extensive outdoor classrooms and food forests. Many of the teachers use the garden to enhance and enrich their existing curriculum. A math teacher at a middle school utilizes plant spacing to illustrate problem solving in geometry and algebra, an elementary school English teacher links pictures of common vegetables and spelling, a pre-school art teacher's lesson is drawing butterflies and beetles and many science teachers incorporate how plants grow into their Earth Science and Environmental studies. These lessons take place both inside the classroom and just as importantly, in the outdoor garden classroom as well. Most participating schools donate extra produce to food pantries, adding a service component for students. Many offer food tastings, utilizing family recipes, to the students. Still others incorporate their harvest into their own lunchtime food service, thus closing the circle from germination and pollination to consumption and nutrition.

Methods: The Desourdy School Garden Mentor Program has the capacity to serve a large number of schools due to its regional management structure and volunteer recruitment techniques. Under the guidance of the State Program Leader, four Regional SGM Program Coordinators intake new schools and organize the school garden

mentors in their area. An interested school first contacts the Regional SGM Manager to coordinate an initial site visit. During the Regional Manager's meeting with the school administration and interested faculty members, an extensive intake form is completed and signed by the principal. The vision and educational goals of the school are discussed and recorded. A vital piece of the puzzle is summer maintenance and activity because this problem accounts for many garden failures. Other evaluation points include garden siting, fencing against pests, water supply and irrigation and tool storage. The intake form and a report of the school visit are then sent to the State Program Leader for approval.

New School Garden Mentors are recruited from the Core Training class at the volunteer opportunity fair and by targeted recruitment to veteran Master Gardeners. They attend a School Garden Mentor training session, complete a state criminal background check and are matched up with schools by their Regional SGM Managers. In addition, both School Garden Mentors and school contacts are invited to attend the URI Extension School Garden 101 Conference for additional training and sharing of best practices annually.

The certified Master Gardener then serves in the role of School Garden Mentor, working with the designated team of teachers and administrators to build the partnership. Many times, parent groups and interested community groups are part of the mix. These Mentors love gardening, teaching and most of all, children. The Mentor is there to answer questions about good gardening practices, take initial soil samples for testing, identify URI resources and educational materials that can assist the school, and provide advice in the design of the garden and plant selection. At the end of the gardening season in October, the program requires an evaluation form from every participating school. The evaluation document requires reporting of certain data points on both student and staff participation and provides a space to report on concepts taught in the garden to demonstrate that learning has occurred, as well as successes and challenges faced during the year in the garden.

The Regional Coordinators themselves usually visit each school location twice a year. Besides the visits, the program utilizes an interactive proprietary Listserv established by URI Cooperative Extension that provides a forum for questions and answers and problem-solving. Any interested Master Gardeners in the region, not just the school mentor, can help the schools with problems as a result.

***Results:**

This program provides learning opportunities for many audiences and promotes community building in locally. With 38 public and private schools engaged in the Desourdy School Garden Mentor Program, we serve over 12,500 youth and over 550 adults. By providing gardening advice and ongoing support, the teachers, parents and administrators become more successful gardeners and attitudes of school staff improve toward using the garden. There are many heart-warming stories we hear from our teachers. Some of the children have never seen a garden before. After participating at school they go home and tell the family about what they learned. Some families who have never considered gardening start a garden at home to continue

One of the schools in the program is a special school for troubled boys aged 8 to 18 that utilizes the garden for teaching and behavior management. A teacher at this school said "These boys lose themselves in their garden. Once they finish their studies they get to go outside and work in the garden. This activity teaches them how to work together, how to get along, how to plan and it gives them the satisfaction of seeing their hard work pay off".

***Significant learning and impact:** School gardens provide a setting for hands-on learning of academic concepts and life skills. The following quotes demonstrating significant learning were collected from our School Garden Mentors and teachers in response to the questions "What do your students learn in the garden?":

- *Learning where the food comes from:* "One aha (!) moment was when we were discussing plant parts and we shared items in a taste test. Lettuce = leaves / carrots = roots/ celery = stems /broccoli =

flowers. As we were tasting, a student shouted out, “You mean all this time my mom made me eat salad, she was making me eat leaves”? I couldn't help but laugh and a few others joined in the giggle as I responded “Yes!” I believe this was an aha (!) moment for the student as well as myself, because I just took for granted that my students recognized and realized the origin of the food that they eat every day. But now I know differently. This sparked a full-on investigation of everything that we eat and where it comes from. For example: Pickles are just cucumbers that are put in a brine. It was amazing to see the light bulb go off above some of those little minds at work”.

- *Learning integrated pest management* “At the last School open garden event, a young boy was showing a man I would guess was his grandfather the school garden - he was explaining all the things the gardeners' wanted to do in their plot for the next year. He told his grandfather they were going to plant more marigolds to keep the bad bugs away from their plants. The grandfather said he just used to spray his plants to keep the bad bugs away. The child explained to the grandfather that (doing) that would kill the bees and the good bugs as well, and they were taught that it would be better just to ‘bug the bad bugs’ so they would go somewhere else.”
- *Learning to share:* “One day a student entered the classroom and ran across the room (backpack and all their gear still on) to take a look at the seed they had planted to see if it had germinated. While they were looking into the planting cup you could see the disappointment on their faces. Another student walked over to see what they looking at. And as they glanced into the cup he said, “It's Okay! They don't all grow at the same time you know. They all grow in their own way, just like us. If it doesn't grow, I'll share mine with you”.
- *The role of organisms in gardening:* “I brought in my vermicomposting bin to allow the students to learn about what foods these small creatures eat and how they can contribute to a successful garden. Why they are so important to sustainability and helping to reduce waste and create beautiful soil for our future garden. I teach 400 students each week and as we were learning about these marvelous creatures, I had a couple students come up to me in my class and share their unique perspective with me. (These were 1st graders.) "Mrs. Rucki, I didn't really know that such small creatures did such an important job. They are so small but do such a big job. We didn't really like worms but now that we know how important they are to helping our earth and our garden grow, we love them”.

Initially, the SGM program began in suburban schools, but it has expanded across the state to inner-city schools as well. The growing participation and reputation of the program has led to a 2016 pilot partnership between the URI Extension Outreach Center and the Providence Public School Department to develop and support active and sustainable school gardens through an inner city "*School Garden Initiative*". Providence schools will have the opportunity to receive a wide range of technical services from URI to develop and support active and sustainable school gardens.

***Budget:** The school garden program is funded by the Catherine Desourdy fund endowment and the general URIMGP Operating budget raised by the URI Master Gardener volunteer symposium, garden tour and plant sale.

*** Names of active Master Gardeners:** Sue Pashko, Theresa Melvin, Christina Haase, Linda Griffiths, Melissa Guillet Claire Golembewski, Cheryl Hahn, Melanie Medysey, Carol Sullivan, Mary McNulty, Linda Carlow, Margaret Kelly, Jim Paiva, Virginia Perry, Karen Morisseau, Jaime Nash, Kim Pond, Jess Kutcner, Elizabeth Fresolone, Michael Pereira, Joseph Carberry, Karla Fox, Roger Jadosz, Alison Buckser, Jaime Fisher, Margaret Crowther, Noreen Kepple, CJ Plunkett, Sharon Pavignano, Linda Hogan, Laura Elson, Maria Fay, Julie Holland, Devon Neely, Annie Guina, Linda Hall, Scott Sunaz-Lods, Barbara Eddy, Michelle Hughes, Jacquie Lofgren, Elaine Trainor, Elaine Hovey, Charlie Junod, Thomas Hoagland, Garry Holmstrom, John Gaynor