

Cornell Cooperative Extension | Onondaga County

Master Gardener Volunteer Expectations & Guidelines



Revised November 2025

I. Purpose

The CCE Onondaga Master Gardener Volunteer Program is designed to increase horticultural knowledge and improve horticultural skills among program participants. As a result of training, a pool of Master Gardener Volunteers becomes available to share research-based horticultural information with the Onondaga County community (e.g., home landscaping, vegetable gardening, ornamental plant selection, composting, and garden pest management).

The Master Gardener Volunteer Program is an integral part of the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County (CCE Onondaga's) Outreach Program and functions in accordance with the Constitution and Bylaws of CCE Onondaga.

II. Qualifications

- A. A basic interest in and/or knowledge of gardening or horticulture.
- B. Enthusiasm for acquiring and sharing horticultural knowledge and skills.
- C. A flexible schedule that allows participation in community educational programs.
- D. Interest in making new friends.
- E. Strong communication skills.

All Master Gardener Volunteers are required to submit a background check Authorization/Consent form (effective September 2005).

III. Benefits

- A. Receive extensive horticultural training based on Cornell University research.
- B. Receive continuing education through monthly speakers, seminars, and CCE programs.
- C. Learn and have fun while helping others; pursue your horticultural interests after core instruction.
- D. Meet new friends with shared gardening interests; exchange information and ideas.
- E. Develop new skills such as public speaking, teaching, leadership, and educational material development.

IV. Achievement Levels (Definitions)

Level 1 – Student Gardener

From acceptance into the program through successful completion of initial training and the final Action Project.

Level 2 – Apprentice Gardener

From completion of Level 1 through achieving 200 volunteer hours.

Level 3 – Master Gardener

After completion of more than 200 hours and continued participation in the program.

V. Requirements

Applicant Requirements

To be considered for the program, candidates must:

1. Complete a Volunteer Application.
2. Submit three work/character references.
3. Complete the Criminal Background Authorization/Consent forms and sign the Volunteer Agreement and Code of Conduct.

Level 1 – Student Gardener

1. Participate in all training sessions.
2. Attend at least 3 Master Gardener business meetings.
3. Attend at least one Master Gardener presentation.
4. Table at one event with a senior Master Gardener.
5. Successfully complete the final Action Project.
6. Fulfill *core requirements* (see below).

Level 2 – Apprentice Gardener

1. Work toward completion of 200 Master Gardener volunteer hours (minimum of 50 hours annually).
2. Fulfill *core requirements*.

Level 3 – Master Gardener

1. Complete 200 volunteer hours.
2. Fulfill *core requirements*.

Core Requirements

To remain active in the program, Master Gardeners must annually:

- a) Volunteer a minimum of 50 hours.
- b) Attend at least 6 Master Gardener meetings.
- c) Actively participate in public education (inside or outside the gardens).
- d) Submit volunteer hours quarterly.
- e) Abide by the Master Gardener Code of Conduct.

VI. Volunteer Hours Include:

1. Attendance at monthly Master Gardener monthly, continuing education meetings.
2. Answering inquiries through the Horticulture Hotline (phone and email).
3. Answering gardening questions at public events (e.g., Regional Market, H&G Show, NYS VOFG).
4. Approved community-based horticultural education (e.g., school programs, articles, community centers).
5. Approved horticultural guidance for community sites.
6. Coordinating or instructing workshops, presentations, or tabling events.
7. Supporting educational efforts through media (TV, radio, print).
8. Administrative work related to the Master Gardener program.

Not Included:

1. Travel time to/from meetings, trainings, seminars, and garden maintenance activities unless directly related to public education.
2. Visits to botanical gardens on personal time (unless part of approved training).
3. Routine garden maintenance at community project areas (unless teaching is involved and pre-approved).
4. Required core instruction for Student Gardeners.

VII. Public Relations

CCE Onondaga Master Gardeners Volunteers often interact with community members, leaders, and media. Volunteers must follow CCE Onondaga guidance to ensure all information is research-based, unbiased, and aligned with Cornell Cooperative Extension standards.

Master Gardeners should follow the guidance of appropriate Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County staff members to ensure that the technical content of all information offered shall be based on unbiased, research-based findings will be implemented.

Cornell's horticulture standard is based upon ecologically sound principles. That usually means recommending environmentally friendly practices before any harsher method. When using Pest Management Around the Home, Part I and II, for instance, Master Gardeners should quote information in Part I (Cultural Methods) before quoting information in Part II (Pesticide Information). Other research-based information may be less environmentally sensitive.

Recommendations should follow Cornell's ecological approach, prioritizing environmentally friendly methods before more aggressive practices.

Media Communications

1. Must reflect Cornell Cooperative Extension research, policy, and guidelines.
2. Written materials must be reviewed and approved by an Extension Educator before release.
3. Content should be positive, enthusiastic, and solution-focused.

VIII. Changes in Volunteer Status

To maintain program integrity, volunteers must agree that if they become inactive, they will refer to themselves only as a graduate or former Master Gardener Volunteer.

Inactive or Leave of Absence

Volunteers may request a one-year leave of absence. They will remain on the roster and continue receiving communications during that time.

Released Master Gardener

A volunteer is released if they:

- Move out of county

- Request release
- Do not renew their commitment
- Have not submitted hours or been in contact for one year

Released volunteers are removed from the roster and no longer receive communications.

IX. Frequently Asked Questions

Can I take a Leave of Absence?

Yes. Contact the Master Gardener Coordinator to request a leave of absence. You will continue receiving electronic newsletters for one year. When you're ready to return, notify the Coordinator.

Can I be released?

Yes. If you relocate or choose to step away, notify the Coordinator. If there has been no contact or hours submitted for one year, release may occur automatically.

Can I transfer from another county or state?

Yes. Transferring volunteers must complete the application process and provide references from their previous program. An essay describing previous MG experience and future goals is required, as well as a background check.

I completed training years ago but never finished my 200 hours. Can I return?

Yes. You must reapply and submit a new application, Volunteer Agreement, Code of Conduct, essay, and background check.

Contact

For questions regarding these expectations, please contact:

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