



May I Help You?

Marianne Willburn, Frederick County Master Gardener

For many years now I have wished to become a Maryland Master Gardener. I knew that a whole world of knowledge and resources awaited the lucky applicant to this state program, but alas, year after year, time was never on my side. As a homeschooler of two small children and a renovator of one old house and garden, day classes were definitely out, and no options existed for the gardener willing to sit through lectures on soil sampling and vermicomposting when other decent folk were home watching their flat screens. So, I potted around in my little plot, learning hard lessons the hard way, and during the long winters I cozied up with one of the hundreds of volumes of gardening delight that have always occupied the bookcase next to my bed.

Years went by. My knowledge base grew, my children grew, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something wonderful.

The irrepressible longing had to stop. This year, I decided that whatever the price I had to pay for a babysitter that could tutor Latin and Mathematics while whipping up a hot lunch, I would slap down the cash and consider it cheap at twice the price. I got out the phone book, looked up the University of Maryland Extension Office and dialed the number of the Home and Garden department.

And then a miracle happened.

For the first time ever, they were offering a night class. I signed up, had an interview, got in my letters of recommendation, passed my criminal background check with flying colors, and finished off the marathon process with a hefty check (I'm still wondering what the blood samples were for). By July, the time had arrived – I was a Master Gardener Intern.

And now, seven weeks later, deep into the routine of lectures, notes and raised hands, I can clearly see that which I instinctively knew and longed for.

It is the pleasure of waxing on for ten minutes about *Juglans nigra* without staring at a pair of glazed eyes. It is the joy of having a discussion about drought tolerant rhododendrons and shade alternatives without having to stop and offer the other person a shot of adrenaline. It is the deep, wallowing pleasure of being surrounded by people who love what you love, and don't make any excuses over it.

In this class, it doesn't matter if you are an amateur or an old pro. It is naturally assumed that you know that you don't know everything, and that Mother Nature will be happy to step in and give you a sound spanking if you think you do. We come from all walks of life, and several different counties for that matter, drawn together by a desire to dirty our hands, rip our clothes, scratch up our arms and produce a two dollar tomato for \$65 worth of tools, compost and equipment.

And when this class is over, our exams are passed, our backs are patted, and our first year volunteer hours are completed, we will descend among you, fresh with success and aching to answer your questions about fertilizer and floribundas. We will be at the end of those help lines talking you down from the ledge after your prize apple tree succumbs to fireblight. We will be one of those smiling faces at the fair, encouraging you to explore this great green world, and forcing a refrigerator sticker into your open palm as you vainly try to make your way to the refreshment tents.

And if your eyes don't glaze over when we start talking; if instead you feel the quickening of your pulse and a quiet joy engulfing you, it could just be that you too should be one of us. The few, the proud, the green of thumb and crazy of mind...the Master Gardeners.

Look into it. I was just kidding about the blood sample.

Note: 2011 MG Training Classes are forming now, space is limited, don't delay. Contact the number below.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County Office , (301) 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities. Equal Opportunity Employer/Equal Access Programs.