The County Agent: Helping gardeners and landscapers

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For the News Leader

Horticulture is considered part of the overall agriculture extension program. The introduction of homeowner horticulture really began with a shift of land usage in agriculture production to suburban and urban development. As more families moved into single-family homes with individual landscapes, calls to Extension began to change from large vegetable questions to how to care for ornamental plants and home landscapes.

With the increase of homeowner calls into Extension offices it became obvious there was a need for horticulture agents—especially ones who could manage and train Master Gardener volunteers. Here in Nassau County, I was the first Environmental Horticulture agent, which means I developed the program from the ground floor. Horticulture agents must be strong diagnosticians but most problems deal with diseases and insect issues on backyard vegetable gardens, dooryard citruses, lawn grass and landscape trees and shrubs. Horticulture’s Best Management Practice (BMP) program involves reducing leaching and runoff of nitrogen and phosphorus from landscapes into local water bodies. The horticulture BMP program also minimizes overuse of broad spectrum pesticides and decreases invasive plants and insects at local beaches and conservation areas.

Many horticulture agents also work with local landscaping businesses to train and assist them in complying with state pesticides licensing. Nassau County’s Horticulture agent specifically does this through the Limited Commercial Landscape Maintenance (LCLM) licenses.

Nassau County currently has over 40 active Master Gardener volunteers who help maintain two demonstration gardens that provide examples of Florida-Friendly Landscape (FFL) practices. These practices, which include proper plant selection, irrigation and mulching, can be easily adapted to any homeowner or commercial landscape.

Last year alone, the Master Gardener volunteers provided Nassau with over 5,000 hours of volunteer service which is valued at more than $108,000. Each agent is responsible for working with the 4-H youth program and the horticulture program does this through its Jr. Master Gardener program, active involvement in Ag Extravaganza and school enrichment programs.

This is one of a series of articles celebrating the 100th anniversary of the county extension agent. Rebecca Jordi, UF/IFAS County Extension Director for Nassau County and Nassau County Horticulture Agent III, is a University of Florida faculty member. Extension locations are the satellite office at the County Building in Yulee and the main Extension office in Callahan.

The UF/IFAS Nassau County Demonstration Garden is located at the James S. Page Governmental Complex and demonstrates best management practices for Northeast Florida.

Mail questions to Garden Talk, c/o Rebecca Jordi, Nassau County Extension, 543350 US 1, Callahan, FL 32011. Visit http://nassau.ifas.ufl.edu.

Being able to identify plants and pest or disease issues was always important for the home gardener, and they could get help and receive training from the Extension office—even before we had a dedicated horticulture agent. From 1915 until 2001, Nassau County’s Agriculture Agent assisted homeowners as well as farmers. Nassau Master Gardener volunteers assist the Horticulture Agent in providing programs to homeowners and children. They also conduct plant sales to fund two UF/IFAS Demonstration Gardens in Nassau County. In 2001, Becky Jordi, center, below left, became the first Horticulture Agent for Nassau Extension and introduced the Master Gardener volunteer program, which now has 15 volunteers. Today, Ms. Jordi also serves as County Extension...