

DC MASTER GARDENER

Reflections and recommendations to rebuild
the DC Master Gardener Program

Results from Listening Sessions and Survey - February 2021



UDC - CAUSES - CUAGE

UNIVERSITY^{OF THE}
DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA
— 1851

Dedication

To the DC Master Gardeners, in recognition of their outstanding volunteer efforts sharing knowledge, promoting sustainable horticultural practices and greening this beautiful city.

Acknowledgements

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Photo Credits

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

UDC has been offering a Master Gardener program for almost 20 years. During this time, hundreds of volunteers have been trained and certified, and have contributed tremendously to the maintenance of public and private gardens across the city. Spurred by a break in continuity caused by the COVID pandemic, CAUSES (College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability, and Environmental Science) leadership seized the opportunity to reflect, rethink and rebuild the program.

To help assess the current state of the program and to identify areas for improvement, six listening sessions and an online survey were conducted in February 2021. In all, 228 people participated, including current and prospective Master Gardeners.

The findings converged on many recommendations for the program. For a full list of recommendations, please see page 31. Four main recommendations are highlighted in this Executive Summary (see right).

As the only urban Land-grant institution in the country, UDC is well positioned to offer a unique, urban-centric, high-quality Master Gardener program, accessible to residents in all 8 Wards and guided by the sustainability goals of the District of Columbia. This report, which received invaluable input from prospective and current Master Gardeners, presents the recommendations necessary to rebuild this successful program.

Top 4 Recommendations

1) Invest in new urban-focused and DC-centric curriculum

A general opinion among participants was that the current content of the program is not urban-focused. Furthermore, instructors routinely came from other states and were unfamiliar with issues unique to DC. As the only urban Land-grant institution in the country, UDC should invest in a new curriculum tailored for the reality of DC.

2) Invest in new, accessible learning platform

Many participants mentioned the necessity of an improved learning platform. This is relevant not just for better user experience, but also for increased accessibility. The new platform should work well on mobile phones and with lower speed internet.

3) Financial aid

Some wards are under-represented among current and prospective Master Gardeners. As the cost of the program is one of the main barriers, UDC should consider offering scholarships and other forms of financial aid for applicants of under-represented wards.

4) Improve volunteer management system

A new volunteer management platform should be contracted to make the process of logging hours easier for all users.



Background and Context

Chapter 1

Background and Context

DC Master Gardener - 20 years greening the city

The DC Master Gardener Program trains DC residents in basic horticulture and agriculture practices. Residents who graduate from the program become certified Master Gardeners and go on to volunteer in their communities by sharing knowledge, leading workshops, supporting research, maintaining gardens and engaging in many other activities throughout the city.

The COVID pandemic pushed the DC Master Gardener program into a forced hiatus. The College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability, and Environmental Science (CAUSES) leadership embraced this opportunity to reflect, rethink and rebuild the program. This is where we are now: engaging with our Master Gardener volunteers and with prospective Master Gardener candidates to forge a new direction for the program.

CAUSES

The DC Master Gardener program is run by the College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability, and Environmental Sciences (CAUSES) of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). CAUSES was formed in 2010 as the university's Land-grant college, and remains, to this date, the only urban Land-grant university in the nation. This means we engage in applied teaching, research and extension programs that help to improve the quality of life and economic opportunity for residents of the District of Columbia.

CAUSES is unique in its organizational structure and its mission: an interdisciplinary college, where academic programs, such as architecture, urban sustainability, health education, nutrition and dietetics, and nursing, train a forward-thinking generation of professionals who will ensure that the world has "Healthy Cities—Healthy People."

The Land-grant programs offered by CAUSES strive to advance the sustainability goals of the District of Columbia and the five core objectives of the National Institute for Food and Agriculture of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which are to:

- Improve food security
- Mitigate climate change
- Combat childhood obesity and other food-related illness
- Improve food safety
- Improve water safety and management
- Expand alternative energy solutions

Many of these goals align perfectly with the Master Gardener curriculum, making CAUSES an excellent college to host the program.

Equity Imperative

The University of the District of Columbia (UDC) believes that the opportunity to gain an excellent education and thrive should be available to everyone. UDC is dedicated to serving the needs of the community of the District of Columbia and producing lifelong learners who are transformational leaders in all sectors. This includes our Land-grant offerings like the DC Master Gardener Program. The Equity Imperative serves as a beacon for the DC Master Gardener program.

Mission

The mission of the DC Master Gardener program is to train and educate participants on effective and sustainable horticultural practices, landscape problem-solving, and vegetable and ornamental growing. The program content will be driven by the priorities of DC residents. It will be DC-centric, urban-based, and most importantly, accessible to residents from all 8 Wards. The program will be guided by UDC's Equity Imperative and the sustainability goals of the District of Columbia.

In order to succeed, one big part of the puzzle is missing: we need to understand what the priorities are for our active and prospective DC Master Gardeners. This is the motivation for the listening sessions and the survey.



Listening Sessions and Surveys Explained

Chapter 2

Listening sessions and survey explained

To leverage the opportunity to rebuild and relaunch the program, and in particular to help us identify areas for improvement, six listening sessions and an online survey were conducted in February of 2021.

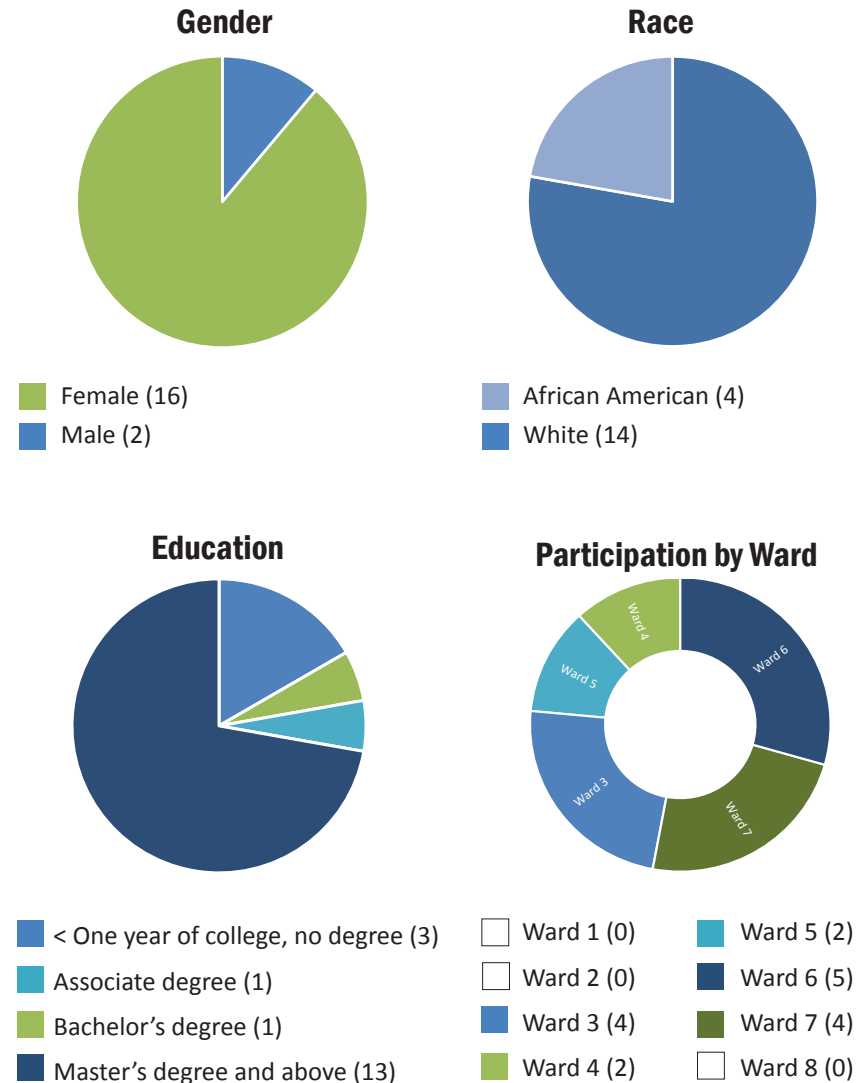
Listening Sessions

Six small group listening sessions were scheduled in February of 2021. Information about the listening sessions was disseminated on the CAUSES newsletter and website, the DUG network newsletter, the Master Gardener mailing list, and among informal networks of urban gardeners in DC.

Participants registered for the listening sessions on Signup Genius, with a maximum of five participants per session. A total of 30 people signed up and 22 participated (8 no-shows).

Times of the listening sessions were varied to accommodate different schedules, and included early morning, lunchtime, evenings, and weekends. The sessions were held virtually on Zoom due to restrictions imposed by the COVID pandemic.

Demographic data from Listening Sessions



The sessions were facilitated by the DC Master Gardener coordinator. The facilitator guided the listening sessions by using prompts from a script that included a series of open-ended questions, followed by direct questions. All sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed. Demographic data of the participants was collected. These were the reported profiles of the participants (some participants did not complete the data).

In total, transcripts of all 6 sessions amounted to 159 pages, which were analysed and organized by theme.

Survey

An online survey was created on Qualtrics and launched on January 25, 2021. The survey was open for 30 days and a total of 207 people participated.

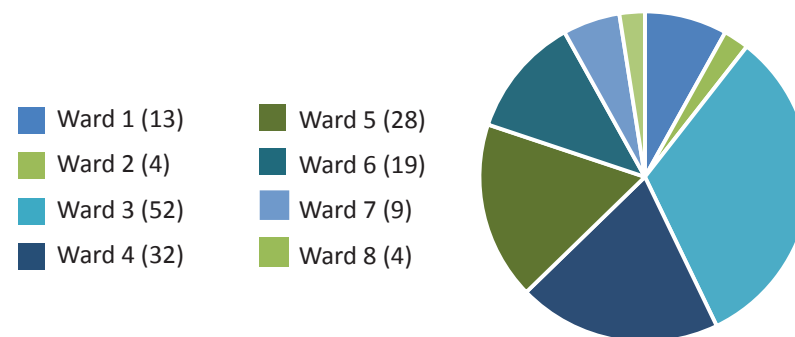
Information about the survey was disseminated widely on the CAUSES newsletter and website, the DUG network newsletter, the Master Gardener mailing list, and among informal networks of urban gardeners in DC.

The survey had three sections: background information, a series of multiple-choice questions and a shorter block of open-ended questions. Topics included questions about the curriculum, course structure and organization, preference of learning platform, class location and frequency, volunteer opportunities, and the pros and cons of the program.

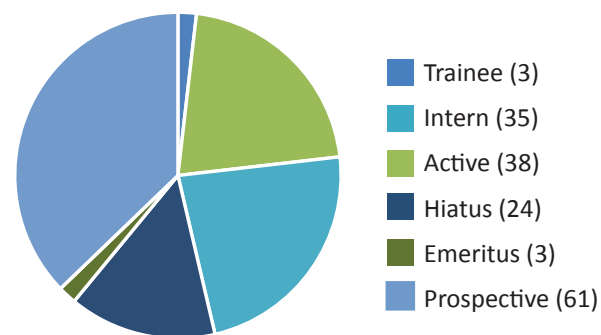
For the survey, we only collected demographic data about where participants lived. We also asked people to identify whether they were a DC Master Gardener, and what their status was (trainee, intern, active, on hiatus). These were the profiles of respondents (some participants did not complete the data).

Demographic data from Survey

Participation by Ward



Master Gardener Status





Findings

Chapter 3

Findings

We compiled the data from the survey and the listening sessions and analyzed them in conjunction. The data was organized into six main topics of discussion and are presented below.

1. Basic Training

The Master Gardener program begins with 40 hours of basic training. Participants are taught about a variety of horticultural subjects by specialists, educators, and other professionals. The basic training is the foundation of the Master Gardener program.

Overall, we received some very mixed reviews about the quality of the basic training. While some referred to the course as including “a wealth of information on various topics” and that it was a “good training program with great speakers”, others complained that “the training was not very good, and could be greatly improved”.

With regards to the course structure, people mentioned that having classes twice a week was “overkill” and made it very difficult for people with full time jobs, families and/or other commitments to attend. This was corroborated by responses in the survey, where 62% of respondents said they preferred classes once a week over a 14-week period rather than classes held twice a week during an 8-week period.

A couple of people mentioned that the training is not offered frequently enough to meet the demand and suggested we increase the frequency to two cohorts each year. Some respondents had applied to the program multiple times and have been on the waiting list for years.

“I think it needs to be offered more often, if you can do it; even more than twice a year, as the demand is high”.

Furthermore, there was mention of people from other states participating, even though the program is only open to DC residents, which further increased the pent-up demand.

There were a few discussions in the listening sessions about how we could structure the online course. One person suggested that, if the course was offered online, we could have multiple cohorts at the same time:

“Being online, I wonder if you could then, as somebody suggested, offer more than one cohort.”

Another suggested that we could pre-record the classes and use an asynchronous learning model:

“I wonder if you could just record some of the classes or the lectures? And It’s also easier for you to manage, and then you have more targeted Q&A times after the lectures.”

As will be discussed in further detail in the section for Equity and Accessibility, location was discussed at length in listening sessions, and it also came up in the survey. Respondents pointed out that the Van Ness location is not ideal; “I didn’t like that training was only held at Van Ness, really limited participation”. And:

“You know, utilizing the entire city in terms of potential meeting spots. [...] In terms of getting to an evening class, it’s a challenge [...] and also having a young child at home. So those are just, a lot of considerations in terms of, diversifying, geographically, age-wise.”

There was also a suggestion for “more on-line resources and training”, again corroborating that people are more comfortable now with online learning. 73% people responded “definitely yes” or “probably yes” about moving the training to an online platform, while only 4% combined answered “definitely no” or “probably no”. In the listening sessions, people commented that we would:

“Increase accessibility for some residents via online/mobile courses. Some residents work full-time and have family obligations, which makes participation in face-to-face classes difficult. Also, some residents do not have access to reliable transportation.”

With regards to the teaching format, people mentioned they would like the course to be less reading and more hands-on, with more experiential learning.

“It was mostly lecture-based/death-by-powerpoint. Practical or applied workshops would make sense; it’s gardening, not literary criticism.”

People mentioned repeatedly that the amount of practical experience they received did not prepare them for applying their knowledge in real settings. They suggested that the basic training could be “extended” if the initial 40 volunteer hours necessary for certification were more focused on specific training:

“Maybe the coursework could be a little bit more real-world oriented. Like we did a pruning clinic but I wouldn’t say I know how to prune a tree. [...] So maybe those 40 volunteer hours before you get certified need to be more directed.”

With regards to the content of the basic training, we found that the group is diverse and has diverse interests. However, there seems to be significant interest in adding more content about food production (as well as food access, food justice and food security), especially urban food production in small scale systems (62 responses), vertical gardening and rooftop farming (39 responses), soilless growing systems (25 responses), and edible landscapes (54 responses).

There was also a lot of interest in adding more content about urban sustainability issues, like small-scale composting (57 responses), rainwater management (50 responses), and native plants and pollinators, which was the subject matter that garnered the most interest of all (92 responses).

Overall, we saw a distinct pattern of people wanting to include more content about uniquely urban gardening issues:

“I would like to see a revitalization and refocus of the material to focus on DC-centric issues such as urban gardening, postage stamp yards, growing food in containers or backyard raised beds, waterway management and conservation, rain gardens, etc.”

One participant suggested that there is specific content that should be included in the basic training that is very relevant to our urban setting - soil contamination:

“For example, I know this is a big thing and not just in an urban setting, soil. I know like my neighbor has a problem because the soil is contaminated and that’s a very big problem. I mean that’s a problem everywhere, but especially in urban settings”

People pointed out that the basic training has traditionally been taught largely by instructors from Maryland and Virginia, who, although extremely knowledgeable in their fields, are not experienced in our uniquely urban problems, as suggested below:

“Most of the lectures were not useful for a gardening volunteer - especially where we are all urban gardeners and lecturers’ knowledge was suburban (ex. we all kept asking about rat management)”

Respondents made a strong case that the subject matter of the basic training should revolve primarily around issues specific to

DC and asked that we invite more speakers with DC gardening experience.

“The training portion of the program did not focus at all on DC-centric issues. This is the DC program but many of the issues and guest speakers were very knowledgeable, but they were talking about growing in Maryland and Virginia.”

Respondents suggested that the content focus more on practical issues that we may deal with here in urban DC: “More focus on the practical (how to grow great veggies- not how to grow wheat in the desert!)”, and:

“A little bit more practical. Some of the things just really weren’t as applicable to an urban setting. I didn’t need an entire class on grass. So kind of keeping that in mind, who is our audience. What are we targeting? I think in other Master Gardeners that may be important, but at least in Ward 6 and I’m in Ward 8 a lot and Ward 5. You do see some grass, but it’s not like that much.”

People were also interested in getting more practical information about how to work with the particular clay soil we have in many parts of DC:

“I feel like there could be a better connection between seeing what we’re learning and how to apply it in terms of gardening practices. Improving soils, like, I’ve learned a lot about soil structure and texture that is extremely useful. But then it’s almost like the last piece is less emphasized which is, how do you actually work with the clay soils that we have here?”

Recommendations for improving Basic Training

To summarize, we present the main recommendations below:

- The content of the basic training should be focused on urban gardening issues that have practical application to the DC setting.
- A new, focused curriculum should be developed by a team of instructional designers.
- Add more content about urban food production, urban compost systems, rainwater management and native plants and pollinators.
- Curriculum should be more hands-on and practical.
- Basic training should be offered at least twice a year to catch up with demand.
- Explore the possibility of transforming initial 40 volunteer hours into a directed learning opportunity.

2. Volunteer opportunities

After participants complete the basic training and pass the exam, they must complete 40 hours of volunteer service to become certified. Once certified, Master Gardeners must complete 20 volunteer service hours per calendar year to remain active.

Although MGs are a very diverse group and interests were varied, we found a few commonalities in their preferences for volunteer activities.

Overall, the top area of interest was in supporting school gardens. 82 people out of 207 participants in the survey demonstrated interest in this area. This was a pattern across all age groups (66% from 18 – 40; 41% for 41 – 50; 43% from 61 – 100) and in participants from most wards (54% in Ward 1; 44% in Ward 3; 50% in Ward 4; 53% in Ward 5; 37% in Ward 6; 56% in Ward 7 and 75% in Ward 8). Surprisingly, there was only 25% interest in Ward 2. On the other extreme, there was 75% interest in Ward 8, perhaps the area of the city where there are fewer resources for school gardens.

This also came up in the listening sessions, with participants suggesting that they would love to see us involved with hosting informal workshops for kids, in outdoor settings, at schools and at community gardens, “to show kids how seeds work, and how it becomes a tomato, would be incredibly enriching”, and:

“I think my next thing is wanting to figure out how I can really start to hone my skills well enough to maybe move

into kind of like school gardens and things. Showing some children how to do it, especially in the inner city. How they can grow their own food, know where their own things come from, and to realize it's not really difficult or hard, nor super complicated to get romaine from the garden.”

“I'm near a school in northeast by John Barrows, and they have a school garden program, but there are other schools and I'm like, well, how do you, actively get those programs started? How do you approach the school, or do you just approach the school and say hey, we're interested in partnering with your science program or maybe start a school garden?”

The runner up was community gardens, which followed a very similar pattern; 81 people out of 207 participants in the survey demonstrated interest in community gardens. This was a pattern across all age groups (66% from 18 – 40; 42% for 41 – 50; 36% from 61 – 100) and in participants from most wards (62% in Ward 1; 50 in Ward 2; 39% in Ward 3; 50% in Ward 4; 47% in Ward 5; 47% in Ward 6; 56% in Ward 7 and 100% in Ward 8).

There were also significant findings with regards to organizations where Master Gardeners would like to volunteer. The National Arboretum for example showed a strong pattern of interest and scored highly across all wards (54% in Ward 1; 50% in Ward 2; 44% in Ward 3; 62% in Ward 4; 74% in Ward 5; 74% in Ward 6; 33% in Ward 7 and 50% in Ward 8) and age groups, (63% for the

18 – 40 group; 54% for 41 – 60 and 52% for 61 – 100).

People seemed dedicated to volunteering in public and private parks and referred to this with pride as being the mission of the program when it was originally created:

“And from what I understand of the national history of the program, it was meant really to support a lot of the public gardens and private gardens.”

We also noticed a slight difference in age groups with projects that leaned more toward sustainability efforts like reforestation and conservation. There was more interest in these activities in the younger group of participants, with interest tapering off with age: 45% from 18 – 40; 30% for 41 – 50; 18% from 61 - 100. We found a similar pattern associated with food justice and policy initiatives, with 32% from 18 – 40; 16% for 41 – 50; 9% from 61 - 100.

With regards to location and proximity, we found that many people are interested in volunteering close to home. For example, 57% of people who live in Ward 3 like to volunteer at Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens; 50% who live in Ward 5 like to volunteer at Bertie Backus; 50% of those in Ward 8 would like to volunteer at The ARC, and so on.

Our findings reflected a desire for some Master Gardeners to be involved in volunteer activities that are educational in nature, with the purpose of educating themselves or the public. Some voiced their concerns about MGs spending too much time involved with garden maintenance, like weeding:

“It was truly disappointing. Not enough hands-on training. Just weeding!”

As we mentioned above, one person even suggested that the 40 initial volunteer hours in the program could be more directed and serve as continuing education.

On the other hand, others mentioned that they thoroughly enjoyed stewardship opportunities, and even found weeding “therapeutic”.

We also noticed an interest in Master Gardeners desire to take on leadership roles within the program itself, in activities like admin support for the program (36 responses), supporting in the basic training of new cohorts (41 responses), and participating in the MG advisory council (31 responses).

Master Gardeners also seem enthusiastic about organizing events and activities in their own wards, with 35 respondents indicating interest. This was also apparent in the desire to be involved with local community organizing and policy by participating in recurring neighborhood meetings like ANC (31 responses).

A few suggestions were made for new volunteer opportunities that we didn’t include in the survey. For example, building projects for gardens (like raised beds), “Ask an Expert” and “Plant Clinics” at farmers markets, beekeeping activities and a therapeutic horticulture program.

We also received some feedback in the open-ended questions

about how to structure and organize our volunteer activities. One person suggested that volunteers be allowed to split their time between pre-approved program activities and local community activities of their choosing, while another suggested Master Gardeners “have the option to get volunteer hours by gardening in their neighborhoods”. The idea behind this is that it would make it easier to participate in last minute activities in one’s own communities, making an impact closer to home.

“I think a lot of it can be about getting out in the community and volunteering in a way. [...] Getting your neighbors together and doing that kind of work, I think, is where we can best support what's happening in our city.”

A few people also mentioned that opportunities should contemplate people with different schedules, and suggested we include some opportunities on weekends, evenings and online.

“it was very hard to volunteer and try to to keep active 'cause it was very, very rigid hours.”

“like I said I find it so hard to find things that were not competing with my livelihood. I was like, well, how about something that I can just take the lead on that is able to work my schedule around it as opposed to the opposite way.”

Others suggested that they should also have the flexibility to schedule their own volunteer hours and activities, without pre-approval from UDC:

“Volunteer opportunities should be more flexible and cater to what volunteers want to do.”

“One of the things I think might help in that is, our volunteering had to be approved by UDC up front and a lot of things like, for instance, in my neighborhood, every year in the fall and summer and this spring we have a neighborhood cleanup [...] But to have a little more control over some of the areas where we do volunteer work when things come up, because it's not something you're going to send a memo out and say 'hey everybody go over to the school and help out with these two flower beds'! It doesn't allow you to do the little discrete things if it has to be a big pre-approved project.”

“A suggestion could be, you know, 10 or 20% of your hours could be something right in your local community, and it doesn't have to be pre-approved, and you know it's something like you did for your neighbors or your school. Just to give it some flexibility”.

One respondent mentioned that the focus of the program had shifted in recent years, and that too many of the volunteer hours were required to be done at UDC, and suggested opportunities should be more varied.

“I think one of the great things about when I took Master Gardeners is that we had access to volunteer in a lot of different places across the city. And I know that the character has changed in the last few years, and that UDC was the main focus of volunteering. But I think that that's a mistake. [...]”

There are so many areas where Master Gardeners could be active and proactive.”

“You had to do 50 hours and like at least 25 of those hours had to be at UDC itself. And it was just very challenging to meet those requirements.”

One person even pointed out that the hours they spent at UDC was time they could have been helping in the community:

“It was required that you put in most of your service hours up on the roof. And that really kind of isolated us from the the communities outside of the roof. I don't know if there's that much work up on the roof that needs to be done, or whatever logic was behind it. But like I said it didn't get us out in the community.”

Recommendations for improving volunteer opportunities

To summarize, we present the main recommendations below:

- Decrease restrictions and requirements related to volunteer activities.
- Remove the requirement for Master Gardeners to volunteer at UDC sites.
- Create volunteer activities in all 8 wards.
- Increase volunteer opportunities at DC schools and explore possible partnership with DCPS.
- Explore possible partnership with DPR to expand volunteer opportunities at community gardens.
- Strengthen relationships with public parks and gardens.
- Explore and develop possible volunteer opportunities in under-represented Wards.
- Transform initial 40 volunteer hours into a directed learning opportunity following from the basic training, in order to better prepare Master Gardeners.
- Work with DC Master Naturalist program to offer more sustainability-related volunteer opportunities.

3. Continuing Education

Certified Master Gardeners must complete 10 hours of continuing education (CE) per calendar year to remain active.

Overall, participants mentioned that they would like to see more opportunities for CE, and, similar to what was said in the previous sections, that the opportunities should be more accessible (available in wards across the city and offered at different times to suit all schedules).

Others mentioned that we should accept more opportunities that are offered online (such as webinars) as well as in-person sessions.

One respondent suggested that we could offer CE opportunities with content that for whatever reason isn't included in the basic training, or is only included superficially. For example, if the basic training doesn't cover a specific topic in depth, we could offer CE webinars with more information about it for a person to dive deeper.

"I could see those things fitting into continuing education. [...] When I had my certificate in my hand, I realized I was not yet the kind of person who would be able to staff in a meaningful way one of those tables at a Farmers market or a community event. [...] So, I would have liked to have had a chance at that point to have had some meaningful continuing education opportunities."

Others talked about how the basic training was great to build a foundation, but they wanted to continue learning, and that the CE part of the program could be a great way to "master" a topic:

"it would be nice to have a pathway to becoming an expert at something"

Finally, field trips were mentioned positively five times in the open-ended questions in the survey and also came up in the listening sessions. It sounds like they thoroughly enjoyed field trips as CE opportunities.



Recommendations for improving Continuing Education

To summarize, we present the main recommendations below:

- Structure CE opportunities in a more meaningful way, and in a manner in which they align with the basic training.
- Approve more online CE opportunities.
- Organize CE opportunities on website and make them more accessible.
- Schedule field trips as soon as it is safe.

4. Equity and accessibility

Since the program is offered through UDC, and UDC is guided by the Equity Imperative, the issue of equity and accessibility is one of the guiding principles we are using to rebuild the program.

We found that there is a huge disparity in participation rates between wards with the highest and lowest incomes: Ward 3 has the highest participation rate in the program (30%), while Ward 8 has the lowest (2%). Since Ward 3 is the area in DC with the highest income and Ward 8 is the area with the lowest, and these two wards have roughly the same population, this is a clear indication that we are not meeting our goals.

We did find however that there is reasonable participation from wards 4,5 and 6, with 18.7%, 16% and 11%, respectively, so we are doing better than expected in the middle ground.

We also found that while participants in wards 1,2,3 and 6 have high active numbers and lower prospective numbers, in wards 4, 5, 7 and 8 the opposite is true, reflecting that there is desire and demand to participate in those wards but lack of opportunity and access.

We found a few indications of how we can make the program more accessible:

First, we found that there is overwhelming support to transition the program to an online platform. 73% of all participants responded

“definitely yes” or “probably yes” about moving the training to an online platform, while only 4% answered “definitely no” or “probably no”.

However, we had comments in the open-ended questions and in the listening sessions from people who pointed out that even in the digital space, equity issues still arise.

“Moving forward, keep the digital divide as a barrier to participation in mind.”

An online course designed for high speed internet will not work well on mobile phones with unstable internet. In order to address this issue better, the course must be designed for these users in mind and hosted on a platform that adapts well to mobile use.

In terms of preferred location for in-person classes, workshops and demonstrations, we found that the Van Ness location is less than ideal. While 72 people (43%) said they preferred Van Ness as the course location, when we examined the results more carefully, we found that of those, 73% lived in Ward 3, which skewed the results in their favor.

We then looked at the second highest option for location: 33% of respondents thought the sessions should alternate between UDC locations. These responses came from residents spread throughout the city.

We also noticed that this trend carries over into the volunteer opportunities that were being offered in previous years, which were located primarily in the wards with higher income. Unfortunately, we did not collect survey data on this and so cannot glean any conclusions. Nonetheless, there were comments in the open-ended section of the survey about this:

“There should be volunteer opportunities in all 8 wards”

“No volunteer opportunities in my Ward (Ward 4)”

“Yeah, and more opportunities in different wards in DC.”

In the listening sessions, we also heard people mention the difference in green spaces in different areas of the city, and how we could work on exploring those opportunities:

“And especially in the underserved communities that are not as green [...]. I think bringing more of that across the city would be a great way for Master Gardeners to be acknowledged and to feel like they've made an impact on their community.”

It also became evident that another way to make volunteer opportunities accessible to all would be to create volunteer opportunities that accommodate people with different schedules, who work/study full time and would only be available to volunteer on weekends, evenings, or even online.

“I've been looking for volunteer stuff since I moved to DC like seven years ago and everybody is like yeah come and start at three o'clock. Like I can't start at 3:00 o'clock!”

Another important point that came up was equity in the application process. While in recent years application to the program was done on a “first come, first serve” basis, we found that this method may have been resulting in unequal access.

“Please make sure that it is all-inclusive. This program should not be based on race, gender or socio-economic background.”

“They have only been for a select few to participate in. The DC MG should be open to all, no matter their skill level, background, etc.”

This system benefits people who may be tech savvy or have more time on their hands, and puts people who work full time and have more family or other obligations at a disadvantage.

Recommendations for improving Equity and Accessibility

To summarize, we present the main recommendations below:

- Invest in a new, accessible, learning platform. This is relevant not just for better user experience, but also for increased accessibility. The new platform should work well on mobile phones and with lower speed internet.
- Explore the possibility of developing a computer-loaner program to facilitate online learning.
- Volunteer activities should be varied and accommodate all preferences, however emphasis should be placed on activities in locations where there is greater need (less on Embassy Row, more in Wards 5, 7 and 8).
- In-person activities should be held in various locations, not only at Van Ness.
- Develop a new application process that is more equitable.
- Offer financial aid and scholarships.



5. Communication and organization

As with any volunteer program, communication and organization are key to keeping participants engaged. The general organization of the program was one of the areas of most dissent, as participants identified areas for improvement.

The listening sessions and the open-ended questions at the end of the survey provided very rich information about communication. Many participants referred to the need to improve communication, in particular with regards to the program requirements, volunteer opportunities, and continuing education opportunities. People said it was difficult to identify these opportunities as they weren't organized in a central location.

"It would be useful to have a website just for MGs to access info about the program [...]. Sometimes I spend a lot of time combing my email."

"I would also say one thing that we haven't seen from you UDC in terms of the Master gardener program is a more robust website than you would see like with UMCV. Just for example, in terms of being able to access pretty static information."

We also received some suggestions regarding the content of the website, and how valuable it would be to have extension resources and information related to basic gardening practices:

"We all know there are questions that a lot of urban gardeners are going to have, put it on the website, people can triage a

lot of their own questions, provided that there's some place for them to obtain the information."

In the same vein, a few people mentioned the need for a volunteer management system to be used by UDC program staff as well as by the Master Gardeners. They mentioned a desire to log in themselves and see how many hours they had done and be able to track their own progress independently.

"Need a system for logging volunteer hours, very disorganized."

"Montgomery County is much larger and they've made a real concerted effort in terms of like organization [...] They're very well organized, they have a really slick volunteer hours system that logs for volunteer hours as well as continuing education hours."

Others mentioned the need for more frequent communication and updates about opportunities, and that this would help keep Master Gardeners engaged. A couple of people suggested using social media, Facebook, Slack, and one person suggested a listserv:

"I think some sort of listserv where MGs could post/share news or where the MG coordinator could share is valuable."

This speaks to a desire that Master Gardeners seem to have in

organizing themselves, in connecting with each other and forming internal networks based on interests.

“But maybe Slack is the option for like the interest group, but if I’m in an interest group for trees and I have a palm tree right here and I’m like what kind of pine is this? And if I like started communicating with my Slack group that’s interested in that, maybe I would want to do a trivia night with them, so maybe kind of starting smaller groups so we kind of like collaborate, crowdsourced some answers and then kind of develop connections that way.”

One way that many programs try to maintain volunteer engagement is by holding monthly meetings, and it seems that our DC volunteers feel this could be a good direction. 62% of all respondents in the survey agreed that we should hold monthly meetings.

In one of the listening sessions, a participant mentioned that UDC did not seem to invest enough in the program. For example, even small things like UDC shirts and name tags were not provided for Master Gardeners. This meant that when they were doing their service hours, they could not identify each other and could not be identified by members of the public.

“We were never given any form of identification like a little pin or a placard or a hat or something that would identify us as UDC certified Master Gardeners. If we did bump into each other at events and we didn’t know each other previously, there was no way of sort of connecting. There was no way of identifying each other, not even for the public.”

Recommendations for improving Communication and Organization

To summarize, we present the main recommendations below:

- Build a website to host all program information (requirements, volunteer opportunities, continuing education opportunities).
- Create an opt-in listserv and Facebook group.
- Send out weekly emails with updates.
- Order shirts and name-tags for certified Master Gardeners.
- Explore options to improve program continuity in the event of staff turnover.
- Initiate every new cohort with a thorough orientation session.

6. Friendships and Community Building

One of the most unexpected findings was that many participants highlighted a sense of community or a sense of belonging, with their colleagues and the program. Many view the Master Gardener program as an opportunity to make friends, to build community, to develop relationships, and to be part of something bigger. It was quite beautiful to read all the comments, so we wanted to include them here.

What did you like best about the program in the past?

"I made friends in the class & am still in touch"

"Meeting gardeners from all over the city"

"Meeting like-minded people"

"Community! I came in with a lot of enthusiasm for the education and was pleasantly reminded how much I love volunteering and learning with a community of like-minded people"

"I loved the subject matter and I enjoyed spending time with other people who shared my interests. It was the most diverse thing I have ever done in DC -- diverse in terms of race, economic status, age, nationality . . ."

"I liked meeting people from totally different social groups who shared an interest in gardening."

"I really enjoyed all the people I met (and continue to meet) in the DC MG community/network"

"the intensity of the onsite class schedule led to lasting friendships and networking"

"the in-person classes helped us form friendships and professional connections which continue over the years"

And how should we move forward to make sure we are strengthening those ties? This respondent really hit the nail on the head - we need to build community:

"It's not going to be easy, but building community is important to the long-run health and growth of the DC Master Gardener program."

Recommendations for improving Friendships and Community Building

To summarize, we present the main recommendations below:

- Schedule Zoom happy hours and in-person activities as soon as it is safe.
- Organize a DC MG potluck event every semester, as soon as it is safe.
- Explore other options for community building.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter 4

Conclusion and Recommendations

In light of the extensive participation and the abundant findings, the listening sessions and the survey provided us with great information to improve UDC's Master Gardener program and allowed us to compile a set of evidence-based recommendations necessary to build this successful program. Here is a compilation of the recommendations from all sections of this document:

1. Basic Training

- The content of the basic training should be focused on urban gardening issues that have practical application to the DC setting.
- A new, focused curriculum should be developed by a team of instructional designers.
- Add more content about urban food production, urban compost systems, rainwater management and native plants and pollinators.
- Curriculum should be more hands-on and practical.
- Basic training should be offered at least twice a year to catch up with demand.
- Explore the possibility of transforming initial 40 volunteer hours into a directed learning opportunity.

2. Volunteer Opportunities

- Decrease restrictions and requirements related to volunteer activities.
- Remove the requirement for Master Gardeners to volunteer at UDC sites.
- Create volunteer activities in all 8 wards.
- Increase volunteer opportunities at DC schools and explore possible partnership with DCPS.
- Explore possible partnership with DPR to expand volunteer opportunities at community gardens.
- Strengthen relationships with public parks and gardens.
- Explore and develop possible volunteer opportunities in under-represented Wards.
- Transform initial 40 volunteer hours into a directed learning opportunity following from the basic training, in order to better prepare Master Gardeners.
- Work with DC Master Naturalist program to offer more sustainability-related volunteer opportunities.

3. Continuing Education

- Structure CE opportunities in a more meaningful way, and in a manner in which they align with the basic training.
- Approve more online CE opportunities.
- Organize CE opportunities on website and make them more accessible.
- Schedule field trips as soon as it is safe.

4. Equity and Accessibility

- Invest in a new, accessible, learning platform. This is relevant not just for better user experience, but also for increased accessibility. The new platform should work well on mobile phones and with lower speed internet.
- Explore the possibility of developing a computer loaner program to facilitate online learning.
- Volunteer activities should be varied and accommodate all preferences, however emphasis should be placed on activities in locations where there is greater need (less on Embassy Row, more in Wards 5, 7 and 8).
- In-person activities should be held in various locations, not only at Van Ness.
- Develop a new application process that is more equitable.
- Offer financial aid and scholarships.

5. Communication and Organization

- Build a website to host all program information (requirements, volunteer opportunities, continuing education opportunities).
- Create an opt-in listserv and Facebook group.
- Send out weekly emails with updates.
- Order shirts and name tags for certified Master Gardeners.
- Explore options to improve program continuity in the event of staff turnover.
- Initiate every new cohort with a thorough orientation session.

6. Friends and Connections

- Schedule Zoom happy hours and in-person activities as soon as it is safe.
- Organize a DC MG potluck event every semester, as soon as it is safe.
- Explore other options for community building.