

The Making of a Master Gardener

Two gardeners master skills, give back to their communities, and spread the gardening tradition.

Story and photos by Karen K. Hansen

Becoming a Master Gardener is naturally about one's own garden. No gardener would invest so much study and time otherwise, but that's not the whole story. It's not even the main plot. The fact that Master Gardener interns Matt Blair and Norma Roberts-Hakizimana preferred to be photographed while volunteering, rather than in their home gardens, highlights the essence of being a Master Gardener.

"People who want to share their interest in horticulture," is how Julie Weisenhorn, director of the University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener program, defines that essence, and it hasn't changed since the program was established in 1977. The original teaching model—classes plus volunteer work—still works, too, even as volunteers' lifestyles and profiles change along with the needs for their expertise.

Master Gardeners serve an increasingly diverse mix of children and adults of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and abilities. They work on rain gardens, edible landscapes, shorelines, and broader

environmental concerns. While most Master Gardener students are in their 40s and 50s, the program attracts people in their 20s and retirees from cities, suburbs, and rural counties.

Learning and Volunteering

To become a Master Gardener, students must be accepted by their local county extension program and take a 48-hour core course, covering every horticultural topic from soils to pests to diagnostics. (Anyone can take the course for university credit, but would-be Master Gardeners pay reduced tuition.) Master Gardener candidates must also log 50 volunteer hours during their first year. Thereafter, Master Gardeners volunteer at least 25 hours per year and take additional classes.

Master Gardeners need a broad, intense education to handle the variety of questions they get when volunteering, though they find plenty of information from the course to apply in their home gardens. "The vegetable professor had so many new ideas that I want to



Matt Blair and Norma Roberts-Hakizimana completed Master Gardener training in 2010.

do," says Matt, who mentions using different colored tarps around different vegetables as an example.

With help from mentors and reams of university reference materials, the newly trained volunteers are ready to assist the public at information booths, diagnostic clinics, help desks, and on phone lines. Working at a diagnostic clinic is "like a detective mystery," says Norma. People bring in insects, plants, and parts of plants, which Master Gardeners examine under a microscope for such things as fungus or a borer's telltale trail.

Like the many Master Gardeners before them, Matt and Norma came to their new volunteer jobs with a love of plants and a desire to help others.

Master Gardener

From Salsa to Sheep

A full-time mechanical-design drafter in Eden Prairie, Matt raises vegetables and keeps chickens, horses, and sheep in Watertown, Minn. After living and gardening on the Blair family farm, which an aunt owns, Matt and his wife, Erin, recently purchased the adjacent farm.

Why heap more on a full plate? Two of Erin's aunts, one a Master Gardener, encouraged Matt to become a Master Gardener, and Erin supported his desire to volunteer.

Since finishing the course, Matt has worked at the Master Gardener Help Desk, judged 4-H competitions, and helped build a Habitat for Humanity house and an arbor on the Carver County fairgrounds in Waconia. He does as much volunteering on Saturdays as he can and “as much heavy lifting as they need” in the Carver County Master Gardener group.

For Matt, gardening is a family affair—one he wants to pass on to his 5-year-old son, Colin, and 1-year-old daughter, Ainsley. When Matt was a boy, his father owned a greenhouse in Minnetonka. All through high school, Matt gardened with his father and planted “his own stuff.” Specializing in salsa ingredients, Matt and a friend made and compared salsa concoctions. He is still at it, although he's cut down from 132 tomato plants (a *lot* of tomatoes went to food shelves) to 48.

When Matt is in his garden, his young family is right there. “I can't keep Ainsley out,” Matt says with a laugh. “She's eating dirt and just loves being in there.” Erin, who has developed a soft spot for lambs and a preference for Roma tomatoes in pico de gallo, planted 60 basil plants to avoid disappointing Colin by running out of pesto, as they did in January. Luckily, Colin loves to pull weeds.

Well before they moved in autumn 2010, Matt had a clear vision of what the farm will look like when he digs

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Many Master Gardener interns work in community gardens.



One of Matt's volunteer efforts was judging a local 4-H gardening competition. Working with children is one of his priorities as a Master Gardener.

into 10 acres of his own. His top priority is making “nice raised beds out of cedar” for vegetables. Walking paths with shade plants will meander through the woods, and salvaged wood from two old barns will become garden sheds. He'll site a perennial garden near a barn so chickens can range through it.

Matt's ultimate focus is longer term: “My big goal is to do stuff with kids,” he says. With his son's preschool class, he created milk-jug greenhouses in which they grew sunflowers, sweet peas, and morning glories. He hopes to do more projects to introduce children to gardening and to pass on this family heritage.



Norma helped found a community garden, where residents grow vegetables, in Frogtown.

From the Windy City to Frogtown

Norma, a full-time nurse at St. Paul's United Hospital, grew up on Chicago's South Side with a community garden across the street and a father who always grew something in the yard. With her first husband and four children, Norma had gardens in Oregon and South Dakota. In 2001, she met and married Frederic Hakizimana, a plant scientist from Burundi. "His mission in life was to feed the world," Norma says of her late husband.

Two years ago, she joined the Frogtown Gardens group, whose members inspired her to become a Master Gardener. "I went through the two-year nursing program at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, which was very intense, so I thought I should be able to do this," she says.

And she's motivated to be a resource. "Sometimes I look at what other communities are doing, and the resources they have are overwhelming," she says. "Here we have them, but trying to get people just to be aware of them is difficult."

When no one approached the information booth Norma and other Master Gardeners hosted at the Hmongtown Marketplace, she circulated among shoppers and vendors, handing out bookmarks and describing local Master Gardener resources. After she told a neighbor about the program's free compost site, she says, "He went to town tearing down overgrown brush and loading it into his car. His yard looks so nice now it's unbelievable."

The community garden at the Greater Frogtown Community Development Center is one of Norma's internship projects. Established in 2010 with Linda

Littrell and Urban Farming, it is as much Norma's garden as the one at her home three blocks away. Like evangelists, the founders made phone calls and distributed flyers door-to-door at local businesses, churches, and mosques. Community members began attending planning meetings and working in the garden. Attracted like butterflies to a garden, children and adults who stop to inquire often pause to help and harvest. Amid abundant cabbage, basil, sweet peppers, summer squash, and tomatoes grow peanut plants. Local children asked to plant them, and Norma and her colleagues believe if you invite input, you'd best act on it.

Neighbors are acting on what they've learned, too. One woman, who had been bringing her children with her to work in the garden, suddenly stopped coming. When she saw Norma, she apologized: They'd started their own garden at a friend's home. Norma replied, "That's exactly what's supposed to happen!"

Norma has a "pretty extreme" dream for her own garden. She wouldn't mind if the vacant fourplex next door were demolished so she could buy the land and plant more vegetables, flowers, and fruit trees and make them available to people in the community. The short-term reality is likely to be a garden at the school across the alley. For now, she grows vegetables in her back and front yards, creating opportunities to talk about vegetables with neighborhood children.

Like Matt, connecting with children is chief among the satisfactions Norma reaps as a Master Gardener. In 2010, she and other Master Gardeners worked with watershed district staff and school students in Little Canada and St. Paul



The Frogtown garden marks areas planted by local youth.

Resource

For more information on the Master Gardener program, go to www.mg.umn.edu.

—K.H.

on seeding and transplanting into rain gardens.

Norma's own children are also gardeners, and her 3-year-old granddaughter, Rianna, calls herself a farmer. "She knows how to pull fruit off the vines properly, how to clip the ends off green beans and get the string off, and how to dig up carrots," Norma says proudly.

"Traditions carry on." **mg**

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