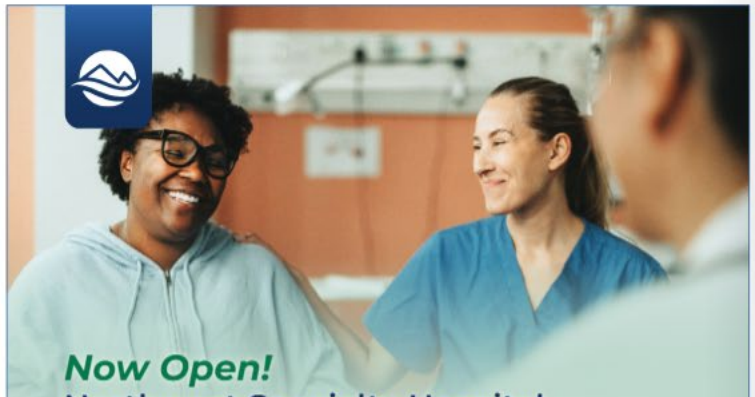

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High Desert Harvest

Master gardeners provide an abundance of horticultural expertise to the community.

WRITTEN BY SUSAN WINTERS

"Gardening in Nevada is a contact sport," declares Tricia Howarth, recent graduate of the University of Nevada, Reno Extension Master Gardener program.

With our short growing season, early and late frosts, excessive day and evening air temperatures, and generally poor soil, it's no wonder gardening in Nevada might be considered a battle with nature. Thanks to Nevada's master gardeners, no one need face such challenges without help.

GROUNDED IN SCIENCE

The Extension Master Gardener Program is a volunteer educator program providing Nevada communities with science-based expertise on a broad spectrum of horticultural subjects, from the timing of planting vegetables to thwarting garden pests. The program draws on the extensive knowledge of university research, not local lore. For instance, there's no need to wait for the snow to vanish from Peavine's peak to start planting,

From left: Master gardeners Rachel, Doreen, Milan, Martha, and Cindy take a break after a hard day weeding in the sun at Rancho San Rafael Community Garden in Reno. Photo courtesy of Rachel McClure

This page, from top: Martha plays in the dirt at the Master Gardener Teaching & Demonstration Gardens at Rancho San Rafael Community Gardens; Master gardeners Randy and Sam at Randy's garden during the 2023 Master Gardener Garden Tour, hosted by Rail City Garden Center to support the Master Gardener Program; master gardeners (left to right) Deb, Doreen, Suzanne, and Carol during a Junior Master Gardener after-school event at South Valleys Library . Photos courtesy of Rachel McClure. Opposite, from top: Elsa volunteers in the master gardener greenhouse, preparing plants for the annual seedling sale; A group of master gardeners at the Master Gardeners Mobile Help Desk at the Spanish Springs Library. Photo by Lou Manna

"If that were true, there would be years we could never garden. There are things we can do to garden in any situation. It just depends on your commitment level," explains Rachel McClure, Washoe County master gardener coordinator.

SOLVING NATURE'S CHALLENGES

"Every shift has something different," says master gardener lead Shari Elena Quinn of the variety of bugs, branches, and bushes that people bring to the office's help desk to identify and solve their gardening challenges.

Some of the tools the master gardeners use are a board displaying 25 types of weeds, a collection of pinned native insects, and a microscope connected to a monitor. If the answer is not readily available, the master gardeners will gladly research the matter.

Not only do the master gardeners handle inquiries from this office (at least 1,427 such inquiries last year alone), but they also have a hand in maintaining gardens throughout the community, including at the Ronald McDonald House, Washoe County Extension Office, and Rancho San Rafael Regional Park, all in Reno. At the Master Gardener Teaching and Demonstration Garden at Rancho San Rafael, in 2024, they logged 970 volunteer hours, providing flowers that went to a local senior center and growing 754 pounds of produce that they donated to the Reno-Sparks Gospel Mission.

Quinn explains that the master gardeners also give monthly, seasonally driven garden talks at the Spanish Springs Library. More a succinct overview than a deep dive into horticultural topics, these sessions, each comprised of three 20-minute lectures, allow plenty of time for addressing attendees' questions afterward and include handouts to take home. Educational events also are equipped with a mobile help desk staffed with master gardeners who are ready to field further questions.

The title of master gardener signifies a significant level of expertise. Prospective master gardeners must complete the online Home Horticulture and Master Gardener courses, which feature readings, live question-and-answer sessions, and lab homework comprising 18 to 20 weeks of training, followed by 15 hours of continuing education and 35 hours of approved volunteer projects during their first year. Ongoing annual commitments for master gardeners in Washoe County include 10 hours of continuing education and 20 volunteer hours. In addition to their work on the help desk and educational talks, these pros also support Seed Swap Day events in January, the Annual Seedling Sale in May, and the Northern Nevada Garden Tour in August.

The two-day garden tour highlights an average of 13 gardens throughout Reno and Sparks. Hosted by Rail City Garden Center in Sparks, the self-guided tour not only supports the Master Gardener program but also provides inspiration about different gardening styles in varied settings for those new to Northern Nevada as well as experienced gardeners eager to revitalize their current landscapes.

"I personally believe that master gardeners are incredible individuals, with an immense passion for their community and all things horticulture and a willingness to share both with the people around them," McClure says. "That combined with the University of Nevada, Reno's Extension research and science-based information base make this a better place to be."

University of Nevada, Reno Extension Master Gardener program
4955 Energy Way, Reno
775-336-0265 • Extension.unr.edu/master-gardeners
Have a gardening question? The Help Desk is available 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. every Tues., Wed., and Thurs.