

TENNESSEE Gardening Frontiers

Knox County Master Gardeners Celebrate Forty Years

A new idea was implemented in Knoxville forty years ago. Two UT Extension agents heard about a new type of volunteer program that was successful in a small number of states. They talked with agents in other states about a training program in which volunteers would learn about horticulture, then volunteer to help their communities. Would that work in Knoxville, Tennessee?

Forty years later, the answer is a resounding yes. With no budget and a need to develop a curriculum in a short time, UT Extension agents Doug Dalton and Harry Bryan created the Knox County Master Gardener program, which began its first training program in October 1985.

Nancy Howell,
Tennessee Extension Master Gardener,
Knox County

The Knox County program grew out of necessity, says retired Knox County Extension leader Harry Bryan. "We were getting lots of questions about plants and landscapes from county residents," he says. In the early 1980s, UT Extension awarded scholarships to agents to cover the cost of exploring ideas that could be applied here.

Bryan received one of the awards and used it to travel to several states, including Texas, Georgia, Kentucky, Virginia, and Arkansas. He wanted to learn how those states were handling the increased information requests. "Agents in those states kept mentioning a program called Master Gardeners," he recalls.

*Retired UT Extension agents Harry Bryan, left, and Doug Dalton, right, founded the Knox County Master Gardener program in October 1985.
Photo by Nancy Howell*



Early Knox County Master Gardeners, from left to right, Audrey Gallagher, June Zachary, Virginia Raskin, and Fritzie Logan. Zachary was past president of the Knox County Council of Garden Clubs, and Raskin was the first KCMG president.

Bryan returned from a month of traveling and learning and met with his team to explore ideas. "I asked Doug if he would be interested in taking on a Master Gardener project, and he said, 'Yes, if you'll help.' At the time, Doug was working with what Extension called community clubs, developed to create groups by topic, interest, neighborhood, and other parameters so agents could enlarge their outreach to groups. We had stacks of phone messages from the public about horticulture, which was my particular area," Bryan recalls.

"Harry came back from his trip enthusiastic about something called Master Gardeners," Dalton says. But Extension had no budget to spend on this idea. So, Bryan, whose area included livestock, approached the Knox County Livestock Association to fund the first class.

The nation's first Master Gardener program was founded in 1973 by David Gibby and Bill Scheer at Washington State University to expand the capacity to deliver high-quality horticulture information to the public. Now Master Gardener programs are active in forty-nine states as well as Canada and South Korea. In the more than fifty years since the founding, the areas of outreach have grown far beyond the original plant clinics to encompass sustainability, food production, and human health and well-being. However, the mission of the Extension Master Gardener program has remained focused on improving lives through horticulture education outreach that extended the reach of local Extension into urban and rural communities.

In Knoxville, a curriculum for the new Knox County program was created by Dalton and Bryan, and recruitment of applicants began. Bryan had a morning farm report radio program on local station WIVK, which he used for years to promote the Master Gardener program.

Approximately eighty people applied for the first class, with forty-eight selected for the class held at the Karns Community Center.

The next year, the graduates of the 1985 class volunteered to help train the second class. "We came up with guidelines for volunteers, such as the use of research-based publications, but our graduates just knew how to do that. And they all got along so well," Dalton says.

Among new interns were garden club members, long-time gardeners, retired military, and even faculty on the agricultural campus. Dave Craig, a UT faculty member, became a Master Gardener in 2002, then president of the KCMG in 2004. "He relished being a Master Gardener," says his wife, Betty. "He even volunteered more than 800 hours one year." Craig, who died in 2020, was responsible for offering landscaping and gardening best practices to hundreds of new gardeners, students, and new homeowners.

For the two Extension agents who founded the Knox County Master Gardener program, their efforts led to huge success. "We accomplished all we planned and a whole lot more," Dalton says. Knox County Extension agent Rylan Thompson agrees: "We have benefited over the years from the great work of Doug and Harry and those early Master Gardeners who created the foundation that we are building on forty years later."

As part of the anniversary, UT Gardens, Knoxville, is providing space for a special commemorative bed, which will be designed by Jack McCoy. Other events will take place during the year to mark this milestone.