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Unique Approach Prepares Master Gardener Graduates for Service

Thanks to an innovative and highly successful training program, the Bedford Extension Master Gardeners Association (BAMGA) has welcomed 12 graduates to the organization. New interns are putting their training to work right away, joining experienced Master Gardener volunteers in supporting Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) and BAMGA initiatives like the 2013 Farm Tour, the Moneta Herb Festival, and the Beautiful Gardens Project. They are also active volunteers in therapeutic gardening programs at local nursing homes, and answer horticultural questions at both the Forest Farmers Market and the VCE Help Desk.

BAMGA's training program for Master Gardeners is the only one of its kind in Virginia. Utilizing self-paced, computer-based study and testing in conjunction with laboratory and field exercises, the unique approach provides time flexibility as well as hands-on experiences. According to Master Gardener Training Co-coordinator Phyllis Turner, the computerized approach allows busy, working adults to take part in the training. She adds, "The labs provide opportunities to apply what students are learning, while they are learning it, while having contact with experienced Master Gardeners who serve as mentors."

Graduates cite the lab component as their favorite part of the training. One intern likened the labs to "field trips for grownups." Field study experiences cover topics including propagation techniques, soil and water quality, small fruits, the proper use of pesticides, and diagnosis and treatment of plant disease. One on one interaction with experienced Master Gardeners and horticultural professionals in the field is key to making BAMGA's program successful and rewarding. Says recent graduate Karen Butler, "I would recommend this program to anyone. Everyone is very supportive and friendly."

Master Gardeners play a crucial role for the Virginia Cooperative Extension in Bedford County. According to VCE Extension Agent Scott Baker, "Extension Master Gardener volunteers greatly enhance the ability of paid Extension staff to deliver educational information to the community. In 2012, they contributed 5,279 hours of volunteer time valued at \$112,750." By leading educational seminars, staffing the VCE Help Desk during the growing season, speaking to civic groups, and providing information booths at community events, these volunteers expand the VCE's reach. Says Baker, "Master Gardeners love to share what they know to help others make well-informed decisions. They are service-oriented, have an inquisitive nature, and care about people, their

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community and the environment. These volunteers are an invaluable asset to the local extension program.”

Anyone with an interest in gardening and a desire to volunteer to share knowledge with others is encouraged to apply to become a Master Gardener. The next training class begins in February 2014. For an application or further information, contact the Bedford Extension office at 540-586-7675 or visit the BAMGA Web site at www.BedfordAreaMasterGardeners.org The application deadline is January 1, 2014 and class size is limited.

If you are a person with disability and require any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this event, contact Scott Baker, VCE-Bedford, at 540.586.7675 (TDD # 800.828.1120) during business hours (8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m.) at least 5 days prior to this event.