

GARDEN VOICE



COUNTY 76 NEWSLETTER
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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

From Backyard Hobbyist to Community Steward: Why I Joined the Master Gardeners

Like many people, I started gardening to unwind. I loved the satisfaction of planting a seed and watching it grow. Most of all, I loved eating home grown vegetables. But over time, I found myself facing the same frustrations year after year: wilting tomatoes, mysterious pests, and my squash being devoured by “jungle rot” just as it started to produce. I wanted more than just trial-and-error; I wanted to understand the science behind the soil.

That curiosity led me to the Master Gardener program, and it was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made. If you love growing things and want to take your skills to the next level, here is why joining the Master Gardeners is worth every minute.

1. Science-Backed Education

Before joining, I relied on internet forums that often gave contradictory advice. The Master Gardener training changed that. Provided by University of Arkansas, Division of Agriculture, the program teaches research-based horticulture on topics like soil science, plant propagation, pest management, and native plants.

- **What I learned:** I now know *why* my plants were failing, the “jungle rot” that ate my squash, and how to fix it using sustainable, environmentally friendly practices.
- **The benefit:** It turns you from a hobbyist into an expert, allowing you to build a garden from scratch with confidence. The best benefit I receive is that I get to eat my results.

2. Giving Back to the Community

The core of the Master Gardener program is volunteer service. In exchange for training, you give back by sharing knowledge with your community. I absolutely love this aspect. Whether it's designing school gardens, planting for pollinators, or running plant clinics, the work feels meaningful.

- **The impact:** You get to help your neighbors succeed in their own gardening efforts and educate people on sustainable, water-wise practices.

3. Finding My People (The Camaraderie)

Gardening can be a solitary hobby, but the Master Gardener program connects you with a passionate group of like-minded individuals. I've made lasting friendships with people who love talking about composting as much as I do.

- **The support:** The community is filled with volunteers from all walks of life, offering a supportive environment to learn, share, and grow.

4. Continuous Growth (The Learning Never Stops)

Once you finish the initial training, the learning doesn't stop. Master Gardeners have access to ongoing education and advanced training workshops. It keeps your mind sharp and introduces you to new, innovative gardening techniques.

Is It Right for You?

You do not have to be an expert to start; you just need to be passionate about gardening and eager to learn. The program asks for your time in return for an invaluable, deep dive into horticulture.

For me, it wasn't just about making my own garden better – it was about becoming part of a team that helps our community bloom. The Master Gardener program provides a way to combine your passion for gardening with service to your community.

This year in County 76 we are saying:

It's Time to Grow!!

Don Casteel, President



MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

~Business~

- The members and guests of County 76 Master Gardeners met in the airwaves as the state was dealing with a covering of winter precipitation. The Zoom meeting was scheduled to start at 10:00 a.m. Consecutively each of our projects met for an hour followed by the General Business session.
- President Don Casteel called the plenary session to order at 2:15 p.m.. He reminded everyone that the day's agenda, the minutes from our October 2025 meeting, and the 4th Quarter 2025 budget report were sent by email to members. Without corrections or additions, October 28, 2025, minutes were accepted as submitted by Diann Arington, Secretary. They will be filed.
- We heard from Barbara Nivens, Treasurer. County 76 CES 2025 beginning balance was \$102,252.99. The 2025 end-of-year balance was \$78,273.66. Barbara asked for questions. There were none. The report will be filed as written.

- Don shared our elected 2026 Executive Board members. 2026 Leadership information is shared later in this newsletter.
- Our 2026 State Online Reporting Team is Julie Treat, Jessica Daves and Jane Burrow. Our volunteer reporting hours are very important to our counties. The time and resources we bring to our communities will only fit under the 'value-added' category. Each county group of Master Gardeners has an online reporting manager who work with the state team. It is important to know who your county online manager is as they are kept up-to-date and can help answer questions regarding the reporting of hours. For troubleshooting and support, members should first contact their county managers about issues. In addition, email support is available at OnlineReporting22@gmail.com
- We heard from Randy Forst, Arkansas Consumer Horticulture/Master Gardener Coordinator. Randy brings a summary of his travels and trainings conducted every quarter. He reminds us of important dates and raises awareness of happenings on the state level. Since we last saw Randy, this is what he's done.
 - This is lambing season. Randy participates in many births each year. He likes taking care of the Dorper Sheep (among others:)
 - Master Gardener Fall Zoom Training (Oct – Nov) produced 432 Candidates
 - Horticulture Faculty Meeting
 - Faulkner County Preliminary State Conference Meeting
 - County 76 Board Retreat 2 days in November
 - Logan County MG Program (December)
 - Carroll County MG Program (December)
 - Washington County MG Program (December)
 - Lonoke County MG Program (December)
 - Looking forward: Master Gardener Appreciation Day is March 19 at Garvan Gardens in Hot Springs. Master Gardener State Conference is in Conway (Faulkner County) on June 2-4, 2028. There is room for only 400 MGs and 100 MG Volunteers. Plant, Nurture, Grow Conference is a one-day event. Saturday, September 19, 2026 is the day and State Extension Office is the Location.
 - Future MG Trainings for 2026. Fall Online (self-paced) is October 7 to December 11. Fall Zoom Training (Classroom setting) is on Wednesdays: October 22, October 28, November 4, November 11 and November 18 from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

~Education~

We were unable to have our planned speaker at our meeting. Ms. Terri Waterman with the Arkansas Federation of Garden Clubs has kindly agreed to share with us at our April

28, 2026, meeting. Her topic is *Elements of Garden Design*. This will be a time of learning much from a knowledgeable gardener.

We will have Ms. Waterman because a request was made in the County 76 Suggestion Box which is on or close to our registration table at every General Meeting. Please feel free to let us know if there is someone you would like to hear or a topic you would like to know more about – the box will take ideas that would make County 76 better at supporting our Master Gardener program and volunteers:)

THE PROJECT PATCH

Advanced Training

Juanita Nesbitt, Joint Chair and Karol Zoeller, Joint Chair

- Karol shared there are seven (7) Advanced Training Sessions in 2025.
- There will be twelve (12) AT classes at this year's Master Gardener State Gardener Conference in Conway (Faulkner County). A maximum of six (6) classes at the conference.
- We will have the AT training in collaboration with the National Garden Clubs and Crittenden Master Gardeners in Crittenden County in September 2026.
- Karol encouraged us to talk to our own counties about holding Advanced Training Sessions. Don added that information can be found online regarding hosting an AT Session.
- *Note:* The Proposal for Advanced Training is the first form to use in the process of sponsoring Advanced Training. It is found on the Advanced MG landing page. Scroll down to the Guide for Hosting Counties and open the Proposal form. It is a fillable WORD document. It also includes instructions to turn in the form.

SCAN HERE FOR THE ADVANCED
MG LANDING PAGE



Fundraising

Susan Colles, Chair and Sheila Waddell, Co-chair

- Susan and Sheila shared that work has begun and is continuing to prepare for this year's Master Gardener State Conference in Faulkner County, which is Conway, Tuesday, June 2, 2026, to Thursday, June 4, 2026. Our conference will be at the Faulkner County Expo Center.
- Fundraising has gone to POT – POTS AND PLANTS, that is. Counties are encouraged to bring as many pots as they would like. Counties are asked to let the committee know by May 1, 2026, how many pots they will be bringing. This will let the committee know how much space will be needed for our Silent Auction. Other items for Auction are also encouraged:)
- Donations should be brought to the State Conference by noon on Tuesday, June 2, 2026.

- Donations may be brought to the County 76 April 28, 2026, meeting (NO POTS AND PLANTS, PLEASE.)



Scan for
Participation Form

Media Relations

Mike Wilbanks, Coordinator

Our wonderful tradition of the annual Master Gardener Calendar continues, thanks to the dedication of Mike. Photo submissions for the 2027 calendar should be made no later than *Thursday, June 18, 2026*.

These are the submission rules.

1. Original to Arkansas MG's only.
2. Color, black & white, or sepia.
3. Must have plant material focus.
4. Taken inside Arkansas borders.
5. Judges' decisions are final.
6. Creativity, composition, technical merit.
7. Landscape only.
8. .jpeg only.
9. Four (4) entries per person. One photo per season.
10. Outdoor photographs are preferred.
11. Photos must be labeled: Your name, Your county name, Name of entry, Season of photos. Example: **AnselAdams,Green,DogwoodBerries,WI**

Plant, Nurture, Grow Leadership [PNG]

Phil McConnell, Chair and Harold Abbey, Co-chair

- This year's PNG Leadership Conference will be held on Saturday, September 19, 2026, at the Little Rock State Extension Office.
- We want to encourage MGs who are still working to attend this Saturday event.
- Sessions will start at 9:00 a.m. The day ends at 4:00 p.m.
- Lunch will be split in two sessions to address size constraints and for easier accommodation.
- We are planning registration for 140 Master Gardeners.

- With our County 76 budget status in mind, we would like to reduce the subsidy PNG receives from County 76.
- Session topics and speakers are being discussed.
- We welcome input for session topics for the conference.



Recruitment, Retention, Recognition [RRR]

Rose Ann Houston, Joint Chair and Becky Gibson, Joint Chair

2025 ARKANSAS MASTER GARDENER AWARDS:

There are 64 nominations from 14 County Master Gardener Programs in nine (9) award categories. Ren Ray (Saline County) has agreed to work on our State Awards. Once again, Liz Hale has graciously agreed to work alongside Ren to help her learn all that must be done. We are fortunate to have ten (10) out of state judges for 2025 awards.

2026 ARKANSAS COUNTY PRESIDENTS CONTACT LIST:

Hilde Simmons worked on this, and the County Presidents List is completed. The list is maintained and shared by Julie Treat due to online posting policy. Hilde and Julie do a lot of work, and it is much appreciated.

2026 ANNUALS TO PERENNIALS SPEAKER:

It was suggested that Randy contact Dr. David Creech with the Arkansas Green Association about speaking. The Annuals to Perennials (A to P) Conference is tentatively scheduled for *Thursday, July 16, 2026*. The Zoom will be 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.

RRR PROJECT PURPOSES AND PLANS

Members discussed priorities for this year. We are going to spend time becoming visible and available to MGs across the state to encourage joining County 76. We will also review online information and update, if needed. We will have communications as needed this year.

Scholarships

Becky Gibson, Chair

Our 2026 Scholarship Committee members are Don Casteel, Kathy Launder, Rose Ann Houston and James Lamb. The deadline for applications for the Janet B. Carson County Sanctioned Project Scholarship is February 15, 2025. The committee will meet and share results with the Board and Membership.

The deadline for applications for the Janet B. Carson High School Senior Scholarship for 2026 – 2027 is Friday, March 13, 2026.



Read what Randy writes:))

COUNTY 76 LEADERSHIP - 2025

State Leadership

Randy Forst, Extension Educator Consumer Horticulture and Master Gardener Coordinator

Julie Treat, Horticulture Program Associate

County 76 Officers

Don Casteel, President (Benton County)

Kathy Launder, 1st Vice President (Washington County)

Rose Ann Houston, 2nd Vice President (White/Independence County)

Diann Arington, Secretary (Garland County)

Barbara Nivens, Treasurer (Clark County)

Debbie Atchison, Assistant Treasurer (Faulkner County)

Becky Gibson, Past President (Pulaski County)

Ren Ray, Member at Large (Saline County)

James Lamb, Member at Large (Hempstead/Red Dirt County)

County 76 Project Leaders

Advanced Training Project

Juanita Nesbitt, Joint Chair (Pulaski County)

Karol Zoeller, Joint Chair (Pulaski County)

Fundraising Project

Susan Colles, Chair (Pope County)

Sheila Waddell, Co-Chair (Jefferson County)

Plant, Nurture, Grow Leadership Training Project

Phil McConnell, Chair (Saline County)

Harold Abbey, Co-Chair (Pulaski County)

Recruitment, Retention, Recognition Project

Rose Ann Houston, Joint Chair (White/Independence County)

Becky Gibson, Joint Chair (Pulaski County)

County 76 Appointed Positions

Mike Wilbanks, Media Relations Coordinator (Craighead County)

Becky Gibson, Garden Voice Editor (Pulaski County)



2026

County 76 Meetings:

Tuesday, April 28, 2026

Tuesday, July 28, 2026

Tuesday, October 27, 2026

State MG Conference (Faulkner County):

Tuesday, June 2, 2026 –

Thursday, June 4, 2026

MG Appreciation Day (Hot Springs):

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Annuals-to-Perennials:

Tuesday, July 7, 2026 (tentative)

Plant, Nurture, Grow Conference:

Saturday, September 19, 2026

State Extension Office – Little Rock

The Garden Voice is looking for County 76 volunteers. If you can write, edit, and/or proofread text; take and send photos; or use graphics and WORD templates in Windows and .pdf formats, please email County76ARMG@gmail.com with your contact information. Thank you.



Remembering Kay Roberts

Kay Roberts lived a life of quiet accomplishment and generous service. Over the course of a surprising and varied career, she worked with the FBI, the Department of Agriculture, and in the law enforcement field, bringing dedication and sharp insight to each role. Beyond her professional life, Kay found deep joy in the natural world. She loved tending plants, spending time with horses—especially her beloved Never Idle—and caring for her cats. As a devoted member of the Lonoke County Master Gardeners and the County 76 State Master Gardener Advisory Group, Kay served on the Executive Board where her strong communication skills and exceptional organization greatly strengthened the work of the group. More than anything, Kay was a kind and supportive friend to many fellow gardeners. Her presence will be deeply missed as we continue to gather, learn, and work together in the gardens she loved so much.

Tuesday, April 28, 2026, 10:00 am

The next

County 76 Membership/Project Meeting

State Extension Office

2301 S. University Ave, Little Rock, AR 72204

We look forward to seeing you there!

Pursuant to 7 CFR §15.3, the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture offers all its Extension and Research programs and services (including employment) without regard to race, color, sex, national origin, religion, age, disability, marital or veteran status, generic information, sexual preference, pregnancy or any other legally protected status, and is an equal opportunity institution.