Growing People

Volunteer Support Extends Reach of Cooperative Extension Programs

Millions.
That’s the dollar value of volunteer hours donated to Cooperative Extension programs.

Across the state, whether it’s native plant masters, Colorado master gardeners, 4-H leaders, food safety advisers or others, thousands of Coloradans are putting in thousands of hours annually.

Their efforts multiply Cooperative Extension knowledge, research and resources exponentially.

Take 4-H, for example. Dale Leidheiser, Extension 4-H youth development specialist, said that in 2003 a volunteer group 12,659-strong put in an average of 128 hours per person per year.

The statewide professional staff of 60 full-time workers couldn’t begin to make a dent in the program delivery 4-H volunteers provide.

The U.S. Department of Labor values volunteer time at $17.19 per hour. That’s a dollar value of more than $25 million in 2003 for 4-H volunteer hours alone.

Cooperative Extension’s Colorado Master Gardener program offers similar benefits. David Whiting, Extension consumer horticulture specialist and Colorado master gardener coordinator, said there are about 1,700 volunteer gardeners statewide. In Boulder County, for instance, there are two Extension agents working in horticulture and 300 Colorado master gardeners.

“The Colorado master gardeners multiply the staff potential by hundreds,” Whiting said. “If we did not have our volunteer gardeners, we would not be serving home horticulture. The Extension agents’ time is spent working with the volunteers and the volunteers’ time is spent serving the community.”

Whiting said the value of Colorado master gardeners’ time is about $1 million a year. “I’m excited about that. That’s quite a contribution back to our community,” he said.

Around the state, volunteer gardeners like Steve Kanewske (pictured at left) of Denver answer phone calls in county offices, help with school and community projects, at farmers’ markets and plant diagnostic clinics.

Kanewske has been serving as a Colorado master gardener since 1996. Retired from a position at US West as director of corporate advertising and brand management, Kanewske said he wanted to learn more about gardening.

“I’ve always had an interest in horticulture and did it as a hobby. When I retired, I had a desire to get a little more solid foundation in some of the dos and don’ts and the proper way to do things. This was an excellent way to do that.”

Master gardeners receive 60 hours of training taught by Colorado State University horticulture specialists and Extension agents. Once trained, the volunteers are required to contribute 50 hours the first year and 24 hours each year after that.

Kanewske has found a variety of ways to donate his time as a Colorado master gardener. He works with Habitat for Humanity homeowners on the design, installation and maintenance of their landscapes. He volunteers at the ProGreen Expo held each year in Denver, serves on a speakers bureau and helps review applicants for new volunteer gardener positions.

The Native Plant Master program, offered jointly by Gilpin and Jefferson counties Cooperative Extensions, is a volunteer-
training program twice removed. The program trains a handful of trainers who then train larger groups of trainers.

“We’re training the staffs and volunteers of other agencies. We do not have to manage those volunteers but they use the information,” explained Barbara Fahey, director of Jefferson County Cooperative Extension.

Fahey launched the program in 1997, which asks each native plant master to commit to teaching 30 people about Colorado plants every year.

From there the benefits begin to multiply like ripples on a pond.

“We’re in the thousands of public contacts every year. Through the end of 2003 we had 51,399 direct educational contacts as a result of this program,” Fahey said.

“In 2003, more than 14,000 public acres have had noxious weeds controlled on them. More than 16,000 acres had native plants used in landscapes. That’s more than 30,000 acres impacted by the program.” Fahey said.

In 2004 alone, by the end of the third quarter the program had 3,755 direct educational contacts.

Volunteer trainer Christine Leahy said that participating in the Native Plant Master program allows her to explore a personal passion for native plants. She was already at work in the environmental education field when she helped Barbara Fahey develop the program. Leahy was director of Jefferson County’s Lookout Mountain Nature Center at the time.

Barbara and I worked together to conceptualize this idea of having an educational program that empowered homeowners and resource staff to teach the public about native plants,” Leahy said. “There wasn’t time for me to do that while on the job, even though the position I had was in environmental education. So I was committed to doing that with Barbara on a volunteer basis.”

The Native Plant Master program focuses on teaching people about native plants as well as the nonnative plants and weeds that can threaten them. As they learn to identify various plants and their places in the local ecosystem, they become increasingly excited, Leahy said. “It helps them value these plants in a way they have not, perhaps, thought of before.”

The efforts of volunteers like Leahy and Kanewske extend beyond the obvious roles of teaching people about plants or gardening, cooking or sewing, or raising cattle. Extension volunteers are engaged in community building.

Helping people with home gardens, for instance, isn’t just about growing better backyard tomatoes. “Gardening is how people teach children job skills. It’s a creative outlet, it’s a stress reducer,” Whiting pointed out. “We’re not in it because we want to garden. We’re in it because we’re growing people.”

– Sue Lenthe

More than a Monetary Return

Colorado State University Cooperative Extension statewide 4-H staff of 60 full-time workers can’t begin to make a dent in the program delivery 4-H volunteers provide. In 2003, a volunteer group of 12,659 4-H leaders put in an average of 128 hours per person. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, who values volunteer time at $17.19 per hour, this translates into more than $25 million of service to their communities.

In exchange for 60 hours of training from Colorado State, over 1,700 Colorado master gardener volunteers give their communities 50 hours of service their first year and 24 hours of service the following years. This contribution is estimated at $1 million a year in service to Colorado communities.