

**Welcoming Remarks
At the Extension Master Gardener Program
State Coordinators National conference**

**Gale A. Buchanan
Chief Scientist, USDA
Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics**

October 8, 2008

Thank you Dr. Hefferen.

Good afternoon and welcome to the Washington, D.C. area.

You're visiting during a beautiful time of year and I hope you all had the opportunity to tour some of the many gardens in the area. All of them I'm sure have benefitted from the work of Master Gardeners.

While I am not claiming to be a master gardener, I am most assuredly a committed amateur.

All of us benefit in so many ways from the Master Gardener's program...so first of all, I want to thank all of our master gardener program coordinators for the important work you do.

Some of you have heard my recent speeches regarding the new paradigm for agriculture. Today agriculture is food for humans, feed for animals, fiber for our clothes and homes, flowers for our environments, and of course, fuel to make things run.

Your programs fill an important niche included in that paradigm that benefits communities throughout the Nation. Master Gardeners not only make our surroundings more beautiful, they support USDA's mission, and help promote important social values such as respect for nature and the environment, and good citizenship.

Each year, Extension Master Gardener volunteers work more than 2.5 million hours on community projects. The monetary value of these volunteer hours ranges from almost \$26 million to nearly \$45 million every year.

In reality their value is priceless.

Not only does the Master Gardener's program help make our environment more beautiful and aesthetically pleasing it also benefits the health and well-being of people and communities. Not to mention enhancing the value of property.

Anyone who is a gardener can attest to the value of spending time outdoors cultivating plants. Gardening provides exercise, stress reduction, and a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Of course when you grow fruits and vegetables you get the added benefits of extra nutrition and saving money.

In the true spirit of what Extension is all about, the Master Gardeners you train help spread the values and benefits of gardening to many others.

In the 36 years since the program began, the Extension Master Gardener (EMG) program has trained more than 90,000 volunteers in the US and Canada.

Each year, 15-20,000 master gardener volunteers are trained in the US alone.

That's a tremendous accomplishment that speaks to your hard work and the enormous popularity of the Master Gardener program.

When I was Dean of the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at the University of Georgia, the Master Gardener's program was very popular and openings were highly coveted. Once, I even had an elected official try to use his position to secure a spot for his wife in the program. The story had a good ending and she was able to get in a future class.

I know all husbands can empathize with someone who obviously saw the benefits of the Master Gardener's program; maybe he just to get his wife out of the house.

The benefits of your programs are multiplied exponentially in neighborhoods everywhere through community gardens, private yards, and public spaces.

Children and other people learn about nature, agriculture, and food through community gardens. They also learn about environmental stewardship and conservation.

Community gardens provide an opportunity for many in urban and suburban areas to enjoy the benefits of gardening as well as providing a healing and restorative sanctuary from modern stresses.

The Master Gardener's program is also an important part of the Research, Education, and Extension mission.

Master Gardeners provide an important link to communities across the Nation that helps protect our natural resources while educating consumers about agriculture, food, nutrition, health, and the environment ... all important missions of USDA.

I know your programs support and promote sustainable gardening practices which in turn support what USDA is trying to do to help farmers and homeowners reduce the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and water.

You are making important contributions to protect our Nation's natural resources every time you train a new Master Gardener.

For example, homeowners use up to 10 times more chemical pesticides per acre on their lawns than farmers use on crops, and they spend more per acre, on average, to maintain their lawns than farmers spend per agricultural acre.

A lot of those excess chemicals end up in our streams, lakes, and oceans. So your efforts to encourage sustainable gardening are vital to improving water quality. Your programs also help communities increase green space which helps reduce runoff into storm sewers.

Another very important contribution is your effort to educate homeowners about composting and other ways to reduce the amount of yard waste that ends up in landfills, thus protecting environmental resources.

Master Gardeners also perform an important service by educating consumers about invasive pest species and participating in local efforts to control invasive plants. This too supports a vital USDA mission.

Each year invasive pests cost the American economy billions of dollars and often cause irreparable harm to native species and the environment. The more awareness we can spread about invasive species, the better we can prevent and control the damage they do.

Another vital initiative your programs are helping us with is protecting pollinators. The Extension Master Gardener program is an important conduit to educating people about the critical role pollinators fill in our food system.

More than 80 percent of the world's food crops rely on pollinators and their numbers have been declining.

I know many state programs have established pollinator-friendly gardens throughout the country which are helping to spread the word to thousands of people about the importance of pollinators and the need to protect them.

By supporting and promoting the healthful benefits of gardening and growing nutritious fruits and vegetables, the Master Gardener program also supports USDA programs that aim to improve the health and nutrition of the Nation.

By teaching children and others about the environment, food, and promoting fruits and vegetables your programs bring people closer to nature and give them awareness and understanding of the important role agriculture plays in society and of the value of environmental stewardship.

In today's society, many people, especially our young people, have no idea how their food is produced, or where it comes from. Their only knowledge about food is that it comes from the grocery store. We need to educate our youth, and indeed everyone, about food and agriculture so that they become informed consumers who understand the importance of agriculture.

Initiatives like Junior Master Gardener's programs help do that while also cultivating important values like community service, respect for the environment, and appreciation of the natural world.

Your programs also help and support an important part of the agricultural economic sector, the horticultural industry.

USDA's Economic Research Service reports the nursery and greenhouse crops industry had cash receipts of more than \$17 billion in 2007. It's no surprise that gardening is one of the top hobbies in the U.S.

Gardening just might be the closest thing to a perfect hobby. Outside of: (1) fresh air and sunshine, (2) strenuous exercise, and (3) producing something useful such as fruit, vegetables, and flowers — you also help beautify the world.

Another very important contribution your program has made is with the eXtension Initiative. Extension Master Gardener Coordinators were one of the "pioneer communities of practice" and one of the first to have content on eXtension through the "Gardens, Lawns, and Landscapes" resource area.

One of the many great things about Extension is that anyone can get their questions answered by an expert, and now eXtension has a feature where they can do that through the internet.

I understand that over half of the questions received by the eXtension "ask the expert" system are Garden Lawn and Landscape questions and your community of practice answers these questions quickly and efficiently.

I applaud this effort and encourage you to keep eXtension on the front burner of your portfolio of educational delivery tactics.

eXtension is helping to prove that Extension is even more relevant in the 21st century. Your programs are ample proof that Extension is reaching far beyond its traditional customer base in rural America.

Through eXtension cooperation, Extension is providing Americans with access to the high quality research-based information that has been the hallmark of its 94 year history.

Now I know many people in the Extension community have been concerned about the future of Extension, especially in light of the new Farm Bill and specifically, the establishment of the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

I want to ensure you that the role of Extension is secure. In fact, I think the need for Extension will become even greater.

Right now the world and our agricultural system face several critical challenges. I've dubbed these challenges the "Grand Challenges" for agriculture in the 21st Century. These include:

energy security; global climate change; water availability and quality; and food safety and security.

Agriculture has a vital role to play in helping to address all these challenges and Extension is already helping in these efforts. In fact, even if you don't realize it, your own programs are helping.

As I've already mentioned, by educating people about conserving resources and protecting our natural resources you are helping in a number of ways.

Issues such as water and invasive species will become even more urgent in the future and education and outreach more vital.

Other Departments are envious of USDA because we have established roots into every community in this country through Extension...and we've been a presence in counties across America for nearly 100 years. Our brand is one of the most recognized and appreciated in the U.S. The Master Gardener program contributes to the maintenance of that quality standard.

Now more than ever, America needs an Extension program that is a proactive, responsive and collaborative. We need an organization that is committed to the growth and development of people through life-long learning. And I think the Master Gardener's program is one of the top examples of Extension at its best.

Thank you for what you have done and my very best wishes for the future of this program.