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MASTER GARDENER Gazette

Happy New Year! While winter seems to be quiet with little activity, there is a lot going on under the leaves and in the bushes of our gardens. Likewise, Master Gardeners are busy with plans. Camano Master Gardeners are planning an Education Garden. The Whidbey Gardening Workshop website is up and running, instructors are organizing their talks, and vendors are being recruited for the Marketplace.

Master Gardeners are sharing their joy in other ways too. See photos from our holiday social, read about our dragon boat racer, and enjoy all the other news in this issue. I know each one of us is planning for a spring filled with a joyous bloom of new life!



The newsletter team invites all Master Gardeners to contribute, whether through information on relevant events or suggestions for future articles. Please contact me with your ideas.

Carol Ann Leonessa, Editor, Master Gardener Gazette
newsletter@icmgf.org



Having a jolly Holiday Social on Whidbey



Contestants vie for Ugly Sweater prize



Camano Master Gardeners celebrate the holidays

From the President

Happy New Year Master Gardeners! 2026 is gearing up to be another great year for Island County Master Gardeners and our community. Our annual Foundation Board retreat is in early January, and we will be discussing ways to ensure that we are aligned with our current goals for outreach to the community and that we have adequate plans for fundraising to meet these goals. We will also review the results of the recent ICMGF survey that over half of our members completed. Thank you to all who participated.



Overall, our members are happy with the volunteer activities available, with 79% of respondents reporting they are satisfied with the current selections. Since strategic planning can help determine if these activities meet our mission and goals, we asked whether members would find it worthwhile. Few were against the idea, many stated it would be useful, while others were unsure and wanted to know more.

So, what would be the process and results of a strategic planning session? Skagit County MGs recently went through a strategic planning process, and their report provides ideas for what the process might entail. Under the guidance of a trained facilitator, planning would include all interested ICMGs. Zoom sessions and possibly an in-person, all-day session would be held. To ensure we receive input from all members, a survey to obtain feedback on important concepts could also be provided to anyone not attending the group sessions.

The overarching purpose of these sessions would be to chart a path for the future (three years or so) by developing a plan that both meets the mission of the Master Gardener Program and reflects what our members are most interested in accomplishing for our community and our membership. This plan would include identifying goals that allow us to complete our plan. As an example, the Skagit goals were: 1) Maintain volunteer satisfaction and retention, 2) Manage resources efficiently (people, time, projects, money, 3) Maintain core outreach, education programs and activities, and 4) Identify opportunities and unmet needs.

Please feel free to contact me or anyone on the Board if you have any questions or ideas or want to provide additional feedback.

Cathy Lofton-Day, ICMGF President

Meet Our Newest Master Gardeners

Amelia Wood, Clinton

Class of 2011 (transfer from Snohomish County)



Hello! My name is Amelia Wood, and I have been in the Snohomish County Master Gardener program since 2011. I have been part of our Native Plant Study Group as well as our Veggie Group. For the last six years, I have volunteered primarily in

Office Clinic, Growing Groceries webinars, and also at a middle school, where we help students learn about seed starting and growing veggies. I now live in Clinton and am excited to meet Island County Master Gardeners.

Susan Busch, Langley

Class of 2022 (transfer from King County)

My husband and I recently moved from Kirkland to South Whidbey. I worked the same half-acre plot in Kirkland for 40 years, and leaving the garden behind



was the hardest part of the move. In fact, many truckloads of favorite plants have made their way to the Island.

Gardening has always been in my DNA, having spent most of my childhood on my grandparents' farm in Kansas. After retiring from a long career as an architect, I was certified as a King County Master Gardener in 2022. I was active with Growing Groceries and helped start an offshoot that matches Master Gardener Mentors with school garden programs.

I look forward to gardening on Whidbey and learning about this new ecosystem. Of particular interest are native plantings for wetland and shoreline buffers, and how to grow vegetables without sharing too much with the deer!

From the Program Coordinator

Happy New Year, Master Gardeners! The start of a new year brings a renewed sense of purpose and is the perfect time to review and highlight core principles of the WSU Extension Master Gardener program. Our [nine priorities](#) address important environmental issues that impact all of us. Our role as community educators is to turn these big-picture subjects into practical steps homeowners can take in their own gardens. When you're volunteering at clinics, events, or in the demonstration garden this year, encourage our neighbors to join us in embracing these important gardening resolutions.



- **Resolve to build healthy soil:** Healthy soil is the foundation of a thriving garden. Encourage gardeners to make compost from kitchen scraps and yard waste that will add organic matter, improve soil structure, and reduce landfill waste.
- **Resolve to keep water clean:** Prevent fertilizer runoff by recommending a simple soil test before applying nutrients. This protects our waterways and ensures that plants get only what they need.
- **Resolve to be water-wise:** Suggest using mulch to retain moisture, and to try converting a section of lawn into a drought-tolerant garden. These steps save water and use less fertilizer and fewer pesticides.
- **Resolve to support pollinators:** Recommend planting native flowering species that bloom from spring through fall. For Island County, consider Oregon Grape, Red-flowering Currant, and Aster to provide continuous food sources for pollinators.
- **Resolve to grow something edible:** Promote the fun of growing your own food by encouraging gardeners to grow at least one fruit or vegetable. It's a simple way to connect with nature and improve health.
- **Resolve to create defensible space:** Help homeowners reduce fire risk by clearing dead leaves and debris near foundations and incorporating fire-resistant plants into their landscapes.
- **Resolve to promote biodiversity:** Encourage removal of invasive species and replace with natives to support ecosystem diversity and wildlife habitat.

- **Resolve to be climate resilient:** Suggest planting climate-adapted species that require fewer inputs and thrive in our area, creating a resilient garden for the future.
- **Resolve to get outside:** Remind folks that spending time in a garden or green space boosts mental and physical well-being. Gardening is good for the soul!

By sharing these research-based practices, we're helping build a more resilient community. Thank you for being a Master Gardener Volunteer and I look forward to working with you in 2026!

Loren Imes, Program Coordinator

WHIDBEY GARDENING WORKSHOP



MARCH 21, 2026
Oak Harbor High School

Celebrate
the PROMISES of
Spring



The 37th annual Whidbey Gardening Workshop is coming soon, with many volunteer and learning opportunities.

The Workshop will focus on the WSU Master Gardener priority of Local Food. This priority teaches sustainable techniques for growing local food to improve individual and community health and wellness. With over 40 classes and a panel discussion, there are plenty of opportunities to learn more about growing your own food. The marketplace will feature Make-n-Take classes, as well as vendors and the bookstore.

Our keynote speaker is John Christianson, owner of Christianson's Nursery and Greenhouse. He is a Certified Nurseryman and an expert on roses and rose gardens.

Volunteer opportunities will be available soon on [GivePulse](#) or by contacting wgw@icmgf.org. Please sign up to help. We look forward to a festive event again this year and thank everyone for helping make it so!

From the Education Garden

It's hard to believe, but next year will mark the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Master Gardener Education Garden at Greenbank Farm! Yes, indeed, it was in March of 2002 that a bold and determined group of Master Gardeners got together to make it happen. They dreamed up designs, rustled up funding, laid out garden spaces, built structures, dug and planted – and created camaraderie.



That original group, and those who joined them along the way, slowly transformed the site from a grassy open space to a series of six original gardens:

Pergola, Cottage, Pond, Rose, Shade, and Native.

Above all, the goal was an Education Garden, showing best practices for our area and founded in science-based principles.



Design decisions were made to communicate useful information and show how ideas could be implemented in the home gardens of our community.



Circa 2003

Our mission statement, updated in 2025, says it all:

We inspire our community to practice sustainable gardening by sharing research-based knowledge and demonstrating the beauty of gardening in the context of the natural world. We showcase a variety of garden themes in a public location available for all to enjoy.

New projects over the years have expanded what visitors can see in the Education Garden, as well as how we communicate what there is to learn. But since the beginning, the Island County Master Gardener Foundation – that's you, fellow MGs! – has provided essential funding, to our unending gratitude. And ever-changing teams of volunteers have stepped up to keep the garden going. May it ever be so, and may you always feel welcome.

Master Gardeners Around Island County

This column is a regular feature of the newsletter, highlighting key activities by our volunteers during the months since the previous issue. We depend on you to tell us what's going on, so please contact Carol Ann Leonessa with your news from around Island County.

Presentation to Coupeville Garden Club.

Kim Baxter and Ilze Zigurs presented a talk on "Crevice Gardening: You Too Can Do It!" to the Coupeville Garden Club on October 2. The 24 people in attendance were enthusiastic about the concept and had many questions. Kim donated her crevice gardening book as a door prize, and more than half the attendees filled out a card to vie for the prize. The theme of "you too can do it" was endorsed by one attendee who had built a small crevice garden in her own yard after seeing the examples at the Education Garden.



Delivering Therapeutic Benefits with Flower Bouquets.

Tandy Scott is using her passion for growing dahlias to share the therapeutic power of plants. After she broke her back in 2023, the only thing that made her feel better was to get outside into her flower garden, where it dawned on her that the flowers might make other people feel better too. So, she took some to the hospital in Coupeville and the patients, employees, and visitors loved them.

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Tandy now delivers bouquets weekly to various departments at Whidbey Health and Maple Ridge Assisted Living in Freeland, often adding whimsical touches like baby artichokes or asparagus from her vegetable garden. Her efforts demonstrate the benefits of our [Nearby Nature](#) program priority, connecting people to nature to promote wellness. Tandy says, "I am grateful to be able to cheer up so many people with my flowers!"



Camano Native Plant Rescue. In late November, Amanda Krass offered to organize a native plant salvage on the property of a friend, where over 100 native plants were dug up and potted by an enthusiastic



team of volunteers for the next plant sale. At last year's plant sale, native plants that were potted from left-over bare root donations from the Whidbey Island Conservation District suffered from transplant shock and looked less appealing to shoppers, limiting sales. By potting plants now, the Camano MGs aim to ensure they are healthy and attractive for the spring plant sale, a key advantage in a crowded season of plant sales.

Holiday Social. Another great year ended with a festive holiday social, with a special appearance by "Dusty Sagebrush," in the form of our own Loren Imes.



Channeling a Texas Master Gardener, "Dusty" presented the plaque that the Whidbey Gardening Workshop

received for the David Gibby International Award at a conference hosted by Texas A&M.

All those present who volunteered at the Workshop stood for a group picture, which was just about everyone in the room. Congratulations once again!

The evening also included the annual service awards where we celebrated the following volunteers for their Years of Service with the Master Gardener program:

- 5 years:** Carol Ann Leonessa, Cathy Lofton-Day, Adena Ray, Sarah Van Alstyne
- 10 years:** Ed Hollis, Don Krafft
- 30 years:** Anza Muenchow, Richard Tamura

Congratulations and thanks to each of you for your dedication to sharing research-based horticultural knowledge and supporting the mission of the WSU Extension Master Gardener program in Island County. Your commitment plays an important role in protecting our natural resources and building a more resilient community.



As is tradition, a cheerful group of contestants competed in the Ugly Sweater Contest. The crowd applauded vigorously as Melissa presented a gift card to the winner, Laura Valente! Laura is a member of the class of 2026, and we look forward to seeing her often during her internship and beyond.

A big thank you to Melissa and the team that helped with setup for this wonderful annual event!

Camano Holiday Party. The Camano Master Gardener group gathered once again for their annual holiday celebration. Carol Anne Ebert graciously opened her home for the event. A bountiful buffet of delicious food was shared along with great conversation and a lively gift exchange. Of course, talk quickly migrated to gardening including providing winter habitat for garden creatures, recent successes and failures, plans for spring, and some really creative ideas for the plant sale.

Plant Detectives: Winter Care of Fruit Trees

by Deb Mitchell

After the leaves have fallen from your fruit tree, it's time to clean up. Remove any fruit that may still be hanging on the tree, since it will harbor disease that will infect next year's growth and fruit. While you're at the top of the tree knocking off old fruit, look at the tips of all the branches for egg clusters left from tent caterpillars. They will be at the highest part of the tree, wrap all the way around the tip, and look like tan foam insulation. They will peel off easily.



Rake up all the leaves, old fruit, and any broken branches, put them in a trash bag, and send them to the landfill. Do not compost because you will inoculate next year's garden. Trim up any broken or splintered branches. Cut back to a bud if a small branch.

More extensive damage like a large branch that tore off bark will need to be trimmed off carefully. Smooth edges don't provide as much cover for disease organisms and will heal more quickly. However, every cut into the cambium layer stimulates the tree to grow back and will be susceptible to cold damage. Keep the trimmings to damaged areas only during the cleanup phase. Moss and lichens do not damage the tree.

Winter pruning is usually done between December and January. It is easier to see the structure of the tree when there are no leaves. It's easier to remove tangled branches if they have no leaves. It's easy to judge how much biomass you are removing; don't remove more than one third of the tree. Pile the branches in one spot so it's obvious how much has been removed.

A bare tree allows for application of a horticultural oil (after pruning) to smother insect eggs and to "gum up" any spores. For dormant oil spray to be effective, you must get 100% coverage.

Assess the tree for structure and light availability. A tree will follow any light and will crowd the space. Know the track of the sun in summer and anything that shades it. Sunlight can only penetrate about 18" into the canopy, so opening the center of the tree or thinning the density of branching improves air flow and reduces disease without detriment to the carbohydrate synthesis that supports fruit growth. Analyze the tree for that growth.

Start with clean, sharp tools and disinfect between cuts. Start by removing "Dead, Dying, Diseased or Crossed" branches. You're pruning to reduce future problems. Crossed and/or rubbing branches cause wounds that are open pathways for disease organisms.

The tree *requires* a leader – that straight upward growing branch with no side branches or fruit spurs. The leader produces chemicals that affect the branching and fruiting of the rest of the tree. If you remove the tip, the tree will start more, growing straight up towards light for 1-2 years. In year 3, it may put out flower buds or side branches. Once there is fruit, the weight will start bending that branch down. If you start at the most upright and call it zero degrees, fruit set will be strongest in the years that the branch is between 45-60 degrees off vertical.

Fruiting starts to reduce between 60-90 degrees when the branch becomes horizontal to the ground. The tree will send up vegetative growth at the point where the branch falls below horizontal. These sprouts of vertical growth can be thinned to one or two that are growing in the direction you would like the tree to fill out. The part of the branch that is lower than 90 degrees can then be pruned out. You can manage this process to rejuvenate one third of the tree every year.

Good luck with your winter pruning!

Rooted in Science, Ready to Volunteer: Meet the Class of 2026

What do a former elementary school teacher, an automotive writer, a mother of two, and a former USAID worker all have in common? A shared passion for gardening and commitment to join you in community service as Master Gardener volunteers!

Twelve new trainees from throughout Island County are halfway through the new Green School, where they're gaining a solid foundation in horticultural knowledge from WSU Extension faculty and staff, Island County volunteers, and local experts.



From left to right: Laura Valente, David Pope, Troyann Johnson, Chris Shelton, Pat Bieler, Vikki Stein, Marion Leach, Celine Geraghty, Jaci Manning, Alexis Burroughs, Steve Kerr, and John Gibson

A key focus for trainees is to learn how to use WSU Extension's research-based resources, like [Hortsense](#) and [Pestsense](#), to answer community questions accurately. They practice these skills through regular assignments so that when training concludes, they will be ready as interns to answer questions and put their knowledge to work in the community.

A new addition to training this year is the Capstone Project. Trainees are working on an individual project that will pull together many of the concepts they have learned into a written article, a public presentation, or a demonstration. By the end of Green School, these future Master Gardeners will not only understand the science behind healthy gardens, but they will also know how to share that knowledge and connect people with trusted resources. These projects will be presented at a date to be determined this spring, where we hope you'll join us to celebrate their achievement!

Camano Education Garden Update

by Carole Matthews

For over two years, the Master Gardeners of Camano Island have searched for the "perfect" spot to create an educational garden. Our reasons?

- To fulfill our Master Gardener mission to educate the public;
- To experience planning, designing, and building a public garden; and
- To expand our identity on Camano Island and attract new volunteers.

Many possibilities have been considered. One possibility was on Island County Parks property around the Multi-Purpose Center, and a team of Master Gardeners spent months developing a comprehensive 52-page proposal. In the end, the proposal was turned down in favor of reserving the space for future athletic uses. We moved on.

Saving us from endless searches, Island County Parks offered us an area of land along a park trail at Barnum Point Preserve. After visiting the land, we determined that although the site is not "perfect," it fills most of the criteria. One area contains an existing old garden, watered but no longer maintained. This is our starting place. Two additional and adjacent areas provide room for expansion, too large for today but perfect for future growth. Barnum Point Preserve is visited by hikers, dog walkers, and hopefully soon, garden lovers.

Camano Master Gardener volunteers formally voted "yes" to accept the offer at our last monthly meeting. Our "yes" was not hurried or rash. We engaged an expert landscape designer to lead us through choosing a perfect spot. We remembered Ilze Zigurs' words when she presented insights into the history of the Master Gardener Education Garden at Greenbank and its challenges then and today. Several times, we examined our small size and burnout possibilities. We discussed searching further but decided that this was the one.

A Planning Committee has been created. Once an agreement is forged between WSU and Island County, and with funding support from you as members of the ICMG Foundation, we will clean up the current garden and prep the land. When that is complete, the Planning Committee will be ready to present its new ideas.

We find ourselves eager, enthusiastic, and cautious all at the same time!

The Secret Lives of Master Gardeners

We all know Bobbi Peskuric as our expert worm wrangler and vermiculture advocate. She tends the worm bins at the MG Education Garden and has given many vermiculture presentations and demos. But did you know that Bobbi is also a dragon boat racer and President of the North Puget Sound Dragon Boat Club?

Dragon boat racing originated in China over 2000 years ago. A favorite origin story is of a Chinese statesman and poet who waded into a river to commit ritual suicide in protest of foreign conquerors. Local people paddled out in their boats to try to save him. The Dragon Boat Festival is now a national holiday in China.



Dragon boating started in the United States because of its benefits for breast cancer survivors, as the movement in paddling is restorative to tissue removed during surgery. It has now become a sport for anyone interested in fitness, recreation, and teamwork.

Bobbi has always been an athlete and was looking for an outlet as she grew older. Dragon boating fit the bill perfectly. Her favorite days in the boat are Zen-like, when the water is mirror smooth and everyone is paddling quietly. In Bobbi's words, "It's the meditative part of boating that I like the most." One pitch-black night around Christmas, her team paddled near Oak Harbor with the entire shoreline lit up with holiday lights – a magical experience.

Bobbi invites you all to join in the fun, emphasizing that it's for everyone, from high school kids to people in their nineties. The club offers three paddling sessions for free, so contact Bobbi if you are interested, or visit their [website](#).

If you are involved in an interesting project or activity outside your MG volunteering that you would like to share, please [contact us](#).

Thank You and Farewell

by Carol Ann Leonessa

I met Martha and Ed Hollis at my first plant clinic held at the plant sale. When someone came by to ask a question, I reached for the reference material. But before I knew it, Martha and Ed had already answered the question. They seemed so knowledgeable that I was a little intimidated. But they quickly made me feel comfortable and supported.



Ed and Martha grew up in Southern California. Martha worked with Parks and Recreation and community landscaping, while Ed worked at the local community college, which is where they met. Martha told me that she knew Ed was the man for her when he patiently stopped the car so she could look at some wildflowers by the side of the road. They married in 1975. When they retired in 2006, they moved to Whidbey Island.

They became Master Gardeners in 2015 and enjoyed volunteering at plant clinics, plant sales and the Whidbey Gardening Workshops. Martha and I also authored an article on the importance of trees and Doug Tallamy's backyard national parks concept for the *Whidbey Weekly*. Ed and Martha were volunteers for Meerkerk Gardens and in 2020-2021 helped with the Botany Adventures program which brought volunteers together with school children to discover plants. Martha said Ed was always late getting the kids back on the bus because they were so engaged in exploring nature.

Ed plays the ukulele all over Whidbey Island with a group called The Coupeville Ukulele Enthusiasts or "CUKES." Martha and Ed also do agility training once a week with their two shelties. Although Ed and Martha are retiring from Master Gardeners for health reasons, they still want to support the program as they are lifelong learners. Martha especially likes receiving the newsletter and hopes that she can still stay in touch that way.

A huge thank you for all they have given in their many years of volunteer service to the Master Gardener program!

Upcoming Events

For details on events, go to the [Foundation website](#) or the [WSU Extension website](#) or the MG emails.

- January 8** Board Retreat
- January 22** Board Meeting*
- January 29** General Membership Meeting & CE (Zoom only)
- January 30** Registration opens for [Whidbey Gardening Workshop](#)
- February 8** Last Day of Early Bird Registration for [Whidbey Gardening Workshop](#)
- February 18-22** NW Flower and Garden Festival
- February 19** Board Meeting*
- February 26** General Membership Meeting & CE (Zoom only)
- February 28** Meet the class of 2026
- March 19** Board Meeting*
- March 21** Whidbey Gardening Workshop
- March 26** General Membership Meeting & CE

*Board meetings are open meetings. If you would like to attend, please contact the board president for details, president@icmgf.org

LOOKING FARTHER AHEAD

- April 26** Spring Potluck (Freeland)
- May 9 & 16** Plant Sales (Whidbey and Camano)



Camano Master Gardeners visit Barnum Point Preserve, with young helpers



Whidbey Gardening Workshop Volunteers at the Holiday Social

ICMGF OFFICERS

President – Cathy Lofton-Day
Vice President – Anita Merrill
Secretary – Kim Baxter
Treasurer – Paul Rowe

AREA REPS

South – Christine Dimm
Central – Loren Imes
North – Lisa Phillips
Camano – Rosemary Easley

State Foundation Rep — Carol Anne Ebert

RESOURCES LINKS

The WSU Extension Island County Master Gardener Resources website contains links to

- approved resources
- MG Roster
- GivePulse instructions
- and much more

Visit the [Resources](#) page or point your smartphone camera at the QR code. If you need the password, contact Loren.



The [ICMGF Member Portal](#) on the Foundation website includes

- member picture book
- minutes of Foundation meetings
- minutes of Ed Garden Committee
- Foundation by-laws & agreements
- selected CE videos

Need the password? Contact Sue Gibson.

[GivePulse](#) website for recording your volunteer hours.

We welcome your ideas and submissions for future articles. Please contact the newsletter editor, Carol Ann Leonessa, at newsletter@icmgf.org.