

*Promoting vegetable access  
among low-income communities  
of color: Perspective of urban  
Master Gardeners*

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## Summary

Differences in neighborhood access to healthy food have an important impact on health. Evidence supports the claim that low-income communities of color face challenges in accessing healthy food. Accessibility and availability of healthy food contributes to the quality of the community food system. Master Gardeners have important roles as allies in national public health efforts to prevent obesity and promote healthy food access in underserved communities. This qualitative study used in-depth, face-to-face interviews (n=18) to uncover challenges and barriers perceived by Master Gardeners who work within urban edible gardens located in under-resourced communities. Key informants included Master Gardeners who have been enrolled within the program for at least three years and volunteer in gardens within low-income communities of color. The participants sampled shed light on how interactions between Master Gardeners and community members may be impairing how the program is received among diverse communities, therefore reducing their effectiveness in meeting program goals of diversity and inclusion. Findings illustrate that, while some Master Gardeners are interested in working with low-income communities of color, negative perceptions may serve as barriers to reaching broader audiences.

## **Introduction**

**The demand for local and regional foods has seen steady growth within the last decade.**

- From 2010-2011, over 7,000 Farmers Markets operated throughout the United States – a 17% increase from the previous year
- Farm to School programs exist in every state
- Locally sourced meats/seafood and produce rank 1 and 2 respectively among national food trends

**Urban agriculture, the growing of plants and raising of animals within and around cities, has helped to fill a growing demand.**

Urban gardens have proven not to be a passing fad. These collective urban projects carry strong ties to economic and social change, and have continued to do so since their beginnings in American cities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Higher rates of chronic diseases are more prevalent among individuals who live in poverty and some racial/ethnic minority groups.**

Evidence supports the claim that urban, low-income communities of color are affected by differences in healthy food access and may exacerbate disparities in diet-related chronic disease and obesity rates.

**Master Gardeners play a unique role in promoting fresh produce consumption.**

Since the program's inception at Washington State University in 1972, this network of volunteers includes over 94,000 members nationwide and has provided 5 million hours of volunteer service with over 80 percent of total hours performed in metropolitan areas. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack has referred to Master Gardeners as the "real experts" in the garden and promotes the program as a resource for people who want to grow their own food.

## Key Findings: What are the barriers and challenges to engaging low-income communities of color?

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- **Lack of racial and ethnic diversity among Master Gardeners**

Every participant interviewed identified the homogeneity of their cohort as a barrier to reaching out to more diverse communities. Some participants commented on slight improvements in diversifying their membership, but overall, the lack of diversity in ethnicity, race, age and gender was observed as a negative feature.

*“Well...I think we're getting, well maybe, I don't know if we're getting better or not, but the population of Master Gardeners is middle-aged white women... So you know, so I think that's a problem, you know, how do we get more people? To engage the communities we want to engage as underserved ... would help to have people from those communities be Master Gardeners... I think, so actually, that's a huge problem, is who Master Gardeners are—and it's not that we don't all have good intentions and you know, want to do good and do the right thing, but you know, “go to a meeting.”*

- **Limited number of Master Gardeners committed to vegetable gardening and may not be comfortable working in diverse low-income communities**

Master Gardeners expressed concern for recruiting more of their colleagues to volunteer in vegetable gardens. Participants from both counties interviewed were aware of the rising interest in urban gardening and the potential that they could meet growing requests.

*“What percentage of the, you know, we're just into it a little ways, but I think we're just on the cusp of what we could accomplish. But there's still a great percentage of the 300 folks in Hennepin County that would like to grow flowers and aren't vegetable growers ... it's to get enough Master Gardeners in there, in the program to help us.”*

Informants acknowledged that some Master Gardeners are not interested in working in diverse, urban areas and cited fear and lack of experience as barriers to greater participation.

*“I don't know what their problems are. I don't know what their fears are. I think some of it, I know, I know, here you go, I know some are just afraid to drive into the areas. When I go to the East Lake Library and you have a policeman at each door and there's very limited parking and you have to park two blocks*

away. I'm not real enthused about doing that, even for me. So I know some Master Gardeners will not go to, won't go back there.

- **Negative associations with being a 'Master'**

Participants were aware that their title could be perceived as off-putting and that they did not want to be considered an expert, rather someone that was there to share and also learn from the community. Some participants expressed how they purposefully avoid wearing their nametag in communities to be more approachable. The removal of nametags by some could be considered an attempt to overcome the inequitable power relationship that comes with their ties to an academic institution.

*"And this probably isn't OK, but I don't always wear my nametag. It feels sort of like it makes me an expert and you know that we're really there to share."*

- **Meeting communication needs of diverse communities**

Limited resources and capacity to communicate through either an interpreter or translated written materials was identified as a challenge. The literacy level of some existing materials was also discussed as a barrier as some materials may be written in advanced or technical language.

*"We went to Hmongtown International Marketplace two or three times this summer ...with materials. But we have crappy materials in Hmong. We have one or two things in Hmong and they're all about emerald ash bore. Who cares? You know."*

- **Casual time spent in gardens does not count as hours**

Informants want to be supported in alternative methods of communication, besides traditional ways such as giving PowerPoint lectures and staffing information booths. Many Master Gardeners valued their time just hanging out in community gardens and were frustrated that their time spent in this way would not count as volunteer hours.

*"And so, there's sort of like gardens in Frogtown and things like that, where you just are there gardening and people come by and you talk to them. And you know, encourage them, and invite them in, and get them interested. And, there's always that question, 'does this really count for hours?' Because you're not really educating, and you know, and the education, is a classical 'I'm standing in front of people, delivering a lecture' mode of thinking. And that's not gonna work in what we're, if we wanna build, sort of, the capacity of these communities to grow their own*

*food and to be engaged in this kind of stuff. It takes the time and the relationship-building, and just hanging out at the garden at the corner."*

- **Affiliation with the University**

An additional barrier that could prevent effective relationship building and communication is the affiliation Master Gardener programs have with large universities. Participants discussed this both as a negative and positive feature of the program. Some communities may not respond well to University groups due to years of being over-researched and not receiving the findings of the research or follow-up that would benefit them.

*"I think also being flexible about how the Master Gardeners can count their hours... when we're in these communities, we need to get in there and weed and work with them, and not act like we're these professional, academic people. And so we need to be in there... And informal education, preparing sites for potential education..."*

## **Recommendations: How can the Master Gardener program help reduce these perceived barriers?**

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The process of creating healthy environments requires a variety of diverse stakeholders to form collaborative relationships. Master Gardeners have important roles as allies in national public health efforts to prevent obesity and promote healthy food access in underserved communities.

Challenges and barriers exist in reaching low-income communities of color. The Master Gardener program should move towards reducing negative perceptions and programmatic barriers to ensure broader participation and meaningful community engagement.

- **Enhance training and capacity of membership to include cultural competency training.**

Consider utilizing the existing strengths and skills of current members to provide guidance on best practices engaging broader audiences. Through the process of conducting interviews for this study, it became clear that many of the participants possess skills and knowledge in community engagement. These Master Gardeners could offer a unique perspective in training their colleagues in how to recognize cultural differences and how to adopt appropriately. Program administrators could also promote diversification of volunteer experiences beyond just the internship year, to ensure that Master Gardeners provide services to a broader range of participants.

- **Highlight the experiences of Master Gardeners who volunteer in low-income communities of color as a way to encourage increased participation among the greater membership.**

Surveys among Master Gardener programs indicate that meaningful opportunities and skills in community growth and development are key elements in maintaining active and committed volunteers.

- **Provide Master Gardeners with the skills to translate science-based horticulture research in meaningful ways to a broader audience.**

Points to consider include cultural relevance, linguistic appropriateness and the average literacy level of the adult population. Existing programs such as Vegetable Growing Basics established by Hennepin County Master Gardeners in 2006, has been successful at partnering with community organizations and developing a curriculum to teach individuals how to grow vegetables. The program actively seeks partnerships with organizations serving low-income, communities of color and could serve as a model. The program could also consider broadening qualifications for volunteer hours to include time spent informally in communities.

- **Examine barriers for broader and more diverse program application and participation**

Program leaders could investigate how applicants are judged during the interview, the goals of the interview committee and criteria developed for acceptance into the program. County program should utilize scholarships for those with limited incomes to cover the core course training and also consider other resources and skills needed to participate in training, such as driving and use of a computer.

- **Develop an urban garden track, specific to Master Gardeners who want to gain skills in urban gardening and community engagement.**

An urban garden track, or certificate program could be modeled after existing programs available for Master Gardeners such as the Tree Care Advisor Program.

- **Connect Master Gardeners with existing Extension programs dedicated to healthy eating among low-income populations.**

Extension's Simply Good Eating Programs provide practical tips to families and individuals for making healthy choices in food and physical activity on a limited budget. Nutrition Educators work with the community to help individuals make the healthy choice the easy choice and includes education in community gardens and promoting SNAP benefits to purchase seeds and transplants.

- **Gather input from community members to direct outreach**

Partner with community members to design outreach and marketing material that are tailored to ethnically and culturally diverse communities. In addition, consider hosting community listening sessions to gather feedback from communities and disseminate findings appropriately.