



STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Ray Prior uses what he's learned to help others through Master Gardener program

By Megan Almon, Photos by Bob Fraley

Not to beat around the bush, but the term “Master Gardener” brings to mind a few ... misconceptions.

Though gardening is the common thread that weaves these individuals together, many have lawns that are a far cry from modern-day Edens. Most would never grace the cover of *Better Homes & Gardens Magazine*.

“I tell people my yard is a perfect example of what ‘not’ to do,” joked Coweta Master Gardener Ray Prior.

Prior, who earned his lifetime membership in April after 10 years of active service, believes being a Master Gardener is about more than creating dazzling floral landscapes. Members must undergo hours of extensive training in areas such as basic botany, soils and plant nutrition, pathology, plant physiology, entomology and many others.

The Master Gardener Program is a voluntary education program offered through county offices at the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service. Through the program, individuals are trained to assist their own county extension agent, especially in horticulture-related projects that benefit the community.

For Prior, it’s about taking the knowledge he’s gained and helping educate others.

He takes his role so seriously, he can be found nearly every Monday at the Coweta County Extension Office off Pine Road, fielding telephone calls and helping walk-ins with questions or concerns about topics ranging from insects, deer or other wildlife nibbling away at their gardens to subjects so strange the stories deserve retelling.

One caller asked Prior whether or not “diatomaceous earth” — a soft-to-the-touch sedimentary deposit formed from the fossil remains of diatoms, most often used to kill parasites — was edible. With a little probing, Prior learned that she ground her own grains to make bread, and hoped a small amount of the substance in her grains might kill the insect larvae that tended to grow there.

A little digging through the extension service’s extensive library, which Prior has helped make user-

friendly during his tenure, assured him that the substance was, in fact, safe to digest in small amounts, though he didn’t know whether or not it would help his caller with her problem.

Another call, however amusing, plucked Prior’s heartstrings.

Shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, an elderly woman called the extension office to inquire about how to purify water.

Prior informed her about a process involving a few drops of chlorine added per gallon of water and, curious about her request, asked why she needed to know.

“She was afraid the terrorists from 9-11 were going to contaminate the country’s water supply,” he said, smiling. Prior’s gentle reassurances eased the woman’s fears, though she no doubt tucked her newfound knowledge away — just in case.

Prior and his wife of 58 years, Rita, moved to Newnan in 1979.

Originally from Buffalo, N.Y., Prior said he “started from scratch” when it came to landscaping his yard at their Shenandoah home.

“Gardening up north is a whole different ballgame than it is down here,” he said, and made reference to Georgia’s infamous red clay.

Prior saw a notice about an upcoming Master Gardening course and signed up.

He said as much as he learned in the foundation course, he’s still learning more each week.

“I love to teach,” he said. “I enjoy helping the people who call or come in, particularly those from out of state or first-time homeowners.”

Prior is one of about 30 Master Gardeners who volunteer at the extension service. One is on duty at all times, answering between 900 and 1,000 questions via telephone alone each year.

Prior was named Master Gardener of the Year in 2000.

The Georgia Master Gardener Program was started in Atlanta in 1979 as a means of extending educational outreach of the University of Georgia’s Cooperative Extension Service. The program is designed to develop highly-skilled volunteers who agree to

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exchange 40 hours of horticulture training for 50 hours of community service, including gardening demonstrations, plant clinics, phone and site consultations, compost demonstration sites, newsletter productions, youth gardening, community gardening and beautification, information booths at fairs and festivals, and horticulture therapy.

Prior said Master Gardeners who complete the course must serve 50 volunteer hours in their first 12 months. To maintain certification, Coweta County Master Gardeners serve 25 volunteer hours annually.

Coweta's club currently consists of about 100 veterans, and nearly 40 Master Gardener courses usually form in the spring or fall. Prior said

registration for Coweta's next course is late this summer. Though the course is not offered in the county this year, it will be a short drive away in Carroll County beginning in January and running through April 2008. Because of limited space, applicants may undergo an interview with Coweta's Extension Agent, Stephanie Ray.

Interested individuals should call the County Extension Office at 770-254-2620 for more information or to apply.

Upon acceptance, applicants enroll

in the twice-weekly, 20-session training program. Participants usually take a mid-term exam and will be required to pass a final exam on the covered material.

Courses are taught by specialists and extension agents from the Georgia Cooperative Extension Service and the University of Georgia as well as local horticulturists and veteran Master Gardeners.

The cost of the program is approximately \$125, which includes

an extensive Master Gardening textbook, name badge, all classes and materials, and a one-year membership in the State Master Gardener Association.



In addition to Master Gardeners, Coweta County is home to a Junior Master Gardener Program.

The Master Gardeners sponsor Coweta's Backyard Association, which provides one-hour gardening sessions on various topics for the general public the second Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. Master Gardeners also plant themselves at the Coweta County Fairgrounds banquet hall before and after Backyard Association meetings to answer gardening questions. ©

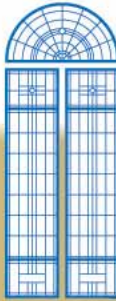
GEORGIA MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEERS SAY THEY ARE:

- > Motivated to share their knowledge and expertise.
- > Accessible to other Master Gardeners, Extension professionals and the public.
- > Service-oriented to enhance their communities and the environment.
- > Trained by the Cooperative Extension Service in current horticulture practices.
- > Excited about meeting other people who enjoy gardening.
- > Research ambassadors who provide cutting-edge horticultural information to consumers.

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