**Understanding Long Term Master Gardener Retention Rates**

**Abstract**

Master Gardener (MG) volunteers are a crucial part of the UF/IFAS Extension mission to educate the public. Based on anecdotal data from the UF/IFAS State Master Gardener Coordinator and empirical findings from the Walton County Volunteer Management System (VMS) archive, UF/IFAS Extension historically recruits and trains MG volunteers successfully but then realizes many leaving the program. In this publication, we present the results of a study of Walton County MG volunteers designed to understand if differences in demographic characteristics, motivational orientations, and volunteerism preferences between long-term (defined here as four years or more) active and inactive volunteers exist. To identify volunteer motivations, the survey included a version of Mergener’s (1979) Education Participation Scale (M-EPS) adapted by Strong (2011). To describe volunteer demographics, eight questions were asked, including age, occupation, education, income, race, and gender. Two questions were included to determine volunteers’ educational project preferences. The study sampled a population of 169 active and inactive MG volunteers, with a response rate of 42% (*n* = 60). Participants confirmed a prior study from Strong & Harder stating the primary motivation for MG volunteerism is a desire to learn. The survey also found women are more likely to remain active volunteers long-term than men and that motivational orientations do not appear to have much effect on volunteer tenure within the limited sample. More research is needed to confirm these findings and provide additional insight into MG tenure. Also, given the sample size limitations of this study, future research should repeat the study across county MG volunteer programs throughout the state to further explore relationships between demographics, motivations and volunteerism preferences on MG volunteer tenure. Ultimately, these results can help inform coordinators’ program focuses and provide additional insight as to which MGs might volunteer long-term and why, allowing coordinators to hone recruiting efforts.

**Introduction**

The Florida Master Gardener program, founded in 1979, celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2019 (Sykes, 2019). Over those forty years, many thousands of Master Gardener volunteers have been trained in the horticultural sciences through the program and those volunteers have donated millions of volunteer service hours, worth more than $1 billion to the Florida economy (Sykes, 2019). These volunteers are an integral part of the Extension mission to bring research-based education to the public (Bobbitt, 1997). Benefits of employing a group of trained volunteers with a large horticultural knowledge and skill set are obvious, immense, and greatly expand the reach of Extension agents in the community (Relf & McDaniel, 1994). As such, it is important that Master Gardener Coordinators properly recruit, educate and retain volunteers.

Extension succeeds in recruiting and educating volunteers but fails substantially in retaining volunteers, particularly past the four-year mark, as observed through Walton County Master Gardener rosters in the Volunteer Management system (VMS) and through anecdotal evidence from Master Gardener Coordinators statewide. Understanding volunteer retention helps Extension educators conserve costs, use their time efficiently, and effectively reach more clientele. Monetary program costs to retrain new volunteers are much higher than maintaining existing volunteers (Meyer & Hanchek, 1997; Ruppert, Bradshaw, & Stewart, 1997). Also, retention of existing volunteers is much more time efficient, as time and effort to retrain a new volunteer are substantial (at least fifty hours of formal classroom training and field demonstrations taught by Extension or industry professionals) (Meyer & Hanchek, 1997; Ruppert, Bradshaw, & Stewart, 1997).

There is little research outlining how to influence retention in volunteers, specifically, what identifiable characteristics influence Master Gardener retention and tenure*.* However, work has been done to identify the importance of motivational characteristics in Master Gardener participation statewide (Strong & Harder, 2011). The information found in Strong and Harder’s (2011) research informed the study presented in this document. Based on their findings, Strong and Harder (2011) recommended a comprehensive study on the effect demographic characteristics (gender, race, age, education, and income) and motivational orientations have on MG tenure. They also surmised that such a study would be beneficial to volunteer educators as a tool to help attract volunteers, to predict volunteer tenure, and serve volunteer needs (Strong & Harder, 2011). The reasons Master Gardeners choose to participate and their associated demographic factors requires further testing to “assess why adults participate as volunteer educators in MG due to the benefit (Schrock, 1999) provided to the land-grant institution” (Strong & Harder, 2011, p. 12). This study contributes to the science of Extension and volunteer management by connecting the links between motivational characteristics and demographics and the goal of long-term volunteer retention and promotion techniques to target those individuals.

**Methods**

To address the gap in research, this study surveyed current and former Master Gardeners in Walton County to:

1. Describe demographic characteristics, motivational orientations and volunteerism preferences among Master Gardener volunteers both active and inactive in the program.
2. Determine if relationships between demographics, motivations, volunteerism preferences and Master Gardener tenure beyond 4 years exist.

Data were collected in the summer of 2019 using a web-based survey using Qualtrics survey software. The electronic survey was distributed to both active and inactive Walton County Master Gardener volunteers whose information was stored in the Volunteer Management System (VMS). Completed responses were received from sixty volunteers.

To identify motivations of volunteers, the survey included a version of Mergener’s (1979) Education Participation Scale (M-EPS) adapted by Strong (2011) and containing 41 statements (see Appendix for M-EPS version used in survey). The original M-EPS was derived from Boshier’s (1971) Education Participation Scale, which was in turn developed from Houle’s (1961) Typology. The M-EPS measures across 6 constructs: Learning (including “*To Feed an Appetite for Knowledge*,” “*To Satisfy Intellectual Curiosity*,” etc.), Socialization (“*To Be a More Effective Citizen*,” “*To Improve My Community Work*,” etc.), Community Service (“*To Share a Common Interest with Someone Else*,” “*To Participate in Group Activities*,” etc.), Vary Routine (“*To Provide a Contrast to the Rest of My Life*,” “*To Get a Break from Routine of Home or Work*,” etc.), Professional Enhancement (“*To Secure Professional Advancement*,” “*To Give Me Higher Status on the Job*,” etc.), and Other’s Perceptions (“*To Comply with Recommendations from Someone Else*,” “*To Fulfill My Professional Obligation*,” etc.). Each of these constructs relates with a particular learning orientation defined in Houle’s (1961) Typology. Variables on the M-EPS scale were measured on a five-point scale: 1 = *very much influence*, 2 = *much influence*, 3 = *moderate influence*, 4 = *little influence*, and 5 = *very little influence* (Mergener, 1979). Mean responses from each construct variable were recorded.

Objective one (to determine numbers and percentages of active and inactive members in each demographic, motivational, and volunteerism variable) was measured through frequency distributions. Objective two (to determine if significant relationships between demographic characteristics, motivational orientations, volunteerism preferences and Master Gardener tenure beyond 4 years exists) was measured through the implementation ofMann-Whitney U tests and Fisher’s Exact tests. To identify demographic information of volunteers, eight questions were asked, including age, current/former occupation, level of education completed, median annual household income before taxes, race, and gender. Four additional questions were asked regarding respondents’ preferences for volunteer activities and their experiences in the Walton County Master Gardener program.

Surveys were emailed to 169 potential participants with 25 undeliverable due to email addresses in the VMS no longer being valid, resulting in 144 accessible potential participants. Of the 144 surveys successfully sent, 60 were returned completed, for a 42% response rate. To account for potential nonresponse error and ensure external validity, per the recommendations outlined by Lindner, Murphy, & Briers (2001), t-test statistical comparisons were run for each variable (demographic, motivational and volunteerism) between early respondents and late respondents to determine if response time affected data. No significant differences were found between early and late respondents, indicating the study could proceed under a reasonable assumption that possible differences from nonresponse error were accounted for. To comply with the objectives of the survey, data from surveys completed by all Master Gardeners, regardless of tenure, were used for objective one, where only data from those who reported being active in the program for more than four years were used in objective two.

The survey respondents were homogenous, with most being white (*n* = 57, 97%) women (*n* = 41, 69.5%). Due to the lack of ethnicities other than white, findings from race were not included in the comparisons below.

**Findings**

**Findings: Objective 1**

The first objective of the study was to describe the demographic, motivational and volunteerism characteristics of Master Gardener volunteers in Walton County to better understand the makeup of the program. The demographic characteristics measured were: gender, ethnicity, age, education level, income (defined as median household income before 2018 taxes) and tenure in the Master Gardener program. A majority of survey respondents were white (*n* = 57, 96.6%) females (*n* = 41, 69.5%) 66 years old or more (*n* = 45, 77.6%) with at least a 4-year college degree (*n* = 38, 64.4%) and median annual income of more than $75,000 (*n* = 35, 68.6%). Table 1 below illustrates the descriptive statistics for Walton County Master Gardener volunteer demographic characteristics.

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| Table 1Walton County Master Gardener Participant Demographics |
| Characteristic |  |  | *f* | % |  |
| *Gender* Female Male |  |  | 4118 | 69.530.5 |  |
| *Ethnicity* African American Asian Hispanic Native American Pacific Islander White  Other |  |  | 1571 | 1.796.61.7 |  |
| *Age* 18 – 34 years old 35 – 45 years old 46 – 55 years old 56 – 65 years old 66 years or older |  |  | 303745 | 5.20.05.212.077.6 |  |
| *Education* Less than high school High School Diploma/GED Some college 2-year college degree 4-year college degree Master's Degree Doctoral/Professional Degree |  |  | 0281113196 | 0.03.413.618.622.032.210.2 |  |
| *Income*$24,999 or less $25,000 to $49,999 $50,000 to $74,999 $75,000 to $99,000 $100,000 or more |  |  | 11051421 | 2.919.69.827.441.2 |  |
| *Tenure in Master Gardener Program*1 year 2 – 4 years 5 or more years |  |  | 141825 | 24.531.643.9 |  |

Objective 1 also sought to describe the motivational characteristics of Master Gardener volunteers that influence why they volunteer. Motivational characteristics (grouped into six constructs) were: Learning, Community Service, Socialization, Vary Routine, Professional Enhancement, and Other’s Perceptions. As expected, Learning was perceived to have much influence on Master Gardener volunteer participation (*M* = 1.74, *SD* = .68). Community Service (*M* = 2.14, *SD* = .83) and Socialization (*M* = 2.29, *SD* = .96) were perceived to have moderate influence. Vary Routine was perceived to have little influence (*M* = 3.41, *SD* = .99). Professional Enhancement (*M* = 4.54, *SD* = .69) and Other’s Perceptions (*M* = 4.39, *SD* = .82) were perceived to have no influence. Table 2 below illustrates the descriptive statistics for the construct items of the modified M-EPS (Strong, 2011).

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| Table 2Walton County Master Gardener Motivational Characteristic Constructs |
| **Constructs & Items** | ***N*** | ***M*** | ***SD*** |
| Learning | 59 | 1.74 | .68 |
| Community Service | 57 | 2.14 | .83 |
| Socialization | 58 | 2.29 | .96 |
| Vary Routine | 58 | 3.41 | .99 |
| Professional Enhancement | 56 | 4.54 | .69 |
| Other’s Perceptions | 57 | 4.39 | .82 |
| *Note*. Scale*:*1 = *very much influence*, 2 = *much influence*, 3 = *moderate influence*, 4 = *little influence*, 5 = *no influence.* |

Finally, Objective 1 sought to measure Walton County Master Gardener volunteer’s preferences as it relates to types of educational projects. The three categories of projects most indicated by respondents as activities they prefer to be involved in were facilitating meetings/trainings (n = 37, 60.7%), community service projects (n = 35, 57.4%) and demonstration garden development (n = 28, 45.9%). Roughly even numbers of volunteers preferred ongoing projects (n = 28, 47.5%) and projects with finite timelines (n = 31, 52.5%).

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| Table 3Walton County Master Gardener Volunteerism Preferences |
| *Preference* |  | *F* | % |
| Facilitating meetings/trainings |  | 37 | 60.7 |
| Community service projects |  | 35 | 57.4 |
| Demonstration garden development |  | 28 | 45.9 |
| Exhibits at fairs/festivals/markets |  | 24 | 39.3 |
| Delivering oral presentations/programs |  | 22 | 36.1 |
| 4-H youth activities |  | 15 | 24.6 |
| Writing newsletter/articles |  | 14 | 23 |
| Greenhouse propagation |  | 14 | 23 |
| Committee leadership |  | 13 | 21.3 |
| Fundraising activities |  | 12 | 19.7 |
| Publicity/Advertising |  | 5 | 8.2 |
| Volunteer development |  | 3 | 4.9 |
| *Preferred Project Timeline* |  | *F* | *%* |
| Finite Project |  | 31 | 52.5 |
| Ongoing Projects |  | 28 | 47.5 |

**Findings: Objective 2**

The second objective of the study sought to select for both active and inactive long term Master Gardener volunteers and compare demographic characteristics, motivations and volunteerism preferences among the two groups to determine if relationships exist that might help predict which Master Gardener volunteers will stick with the program long-term.There was a significant difference in respondents’ tenure by gender, (*x2* = .7.034, *p* = .008) with women being significantly more likely than men to remain active after giving more than four years of volunteer service to the program. The effect size was small (φ = -.493). There were no other significant differences in respondents’ tenure by any other demographic characteristic.

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| Table 4Fisher’s Exact test for Master Gardener tenure beyond 5 years and Demographic Characteristics |
| Demographic characteristics | Active | Inactive  | *Χ*2 | *p* | Φ |
| *f* | % | *F* | % |
| **Education Level** | 2.445 | .928 | 2.93 |
| Less than high school | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |  |  |  |
| High School Diploma/GED | 1 | 5% | 0 | 0 |
| Some college | 3 | 15% | 2 | 22.2% |
| 2-year college degree | 6 | 30% | 2 | 22.2% |
| 4-year college degree | 2 | 10% | 0 | 0 |
| Master's Degree | 5 | 25% | 4 | 44.4% |
| Doctoral/Professional Degree | 3 | 15% | 1 | 11.1% |
| **Income** | 2.869 | .769 | .348 |
| $24,999 or less | 0 | 0 | 1 | 14.3 |  |  |  |
| $25,000 to $49,999 | 1 | 5.9 | 0 | 0 |
| $50,000 to $74,999 | 3 | 17.6 | 1 | 14.3 |
| $75,000 to $99,000 | 3 | 17.6 | 1 | 14.3 |
| $100,000 or more | 10 | 58.8 | 4 | 57.1 |
| **Gender** | 7.034 | .016 | -.493 |
| Male | 2 | 10% | 5 | 55.6% |  |  |  |
| Female | 18 | 90% | 4 | 44.4% |

There were no significant differences between motivational orientations of long term Master Gardener volunteers and whether or not they have remained active in the program. The *Mann-Whitney U test* was used for this comparison between groups. This method was chosen instead of the more traditional *t-test* due to the very small sample size and the likelihood that the data may not have been equally distributed. The *Mann-Whitney U test* also gives a *mean rank* score, indicating which group had a higher mean for each variable. As seen below, there was basically no difference in mean rank among active and inactive MGs in each construct, further illustrating the lack of significant differences. Though the study’s sample under comparison was very small (*n* = 29), this comparison nonetheless shows that the Learning, Community Service and Socialization constructs were the primary reasons for volunteerism regardless of whether the Master Gardener volunteer was still involved with the program or not. Finally, the researchers note that when the sample size was increased by amending the definition of long-term Master Gardener volunteers as those with five or more years of active service, significant differences among motivational orientations between active and inactive groups were observed.

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| Table 5*Mann-Whitney U test* for Master Gardener tenure beyond 5 years and Motivational Orientations (summarized into six constructs) |
| **Constructs** | ***N*** | ***Mean Rank*** | ***SD*** | ***Mann-Whitney U*** | ***p*** |
| *Learning* |
| Active  | 20 | 14.93 | .77 | 88.5 | .945 |
| Inactive | 9 | 15.17 | .76376 |
| *Community Service* |
| Active | 20 | 14.85 | .7821 | 87.0 | .908 |
| Inactive | 9 | 15.33 | .78174 |
| *Socialization* |
| Active | 20 | 15.08 | .80125 | 88.5 | .945 |
| Inactive | 9 | 14.83 | .55478 |
| *Vary Routine* |
| Active | 20 | 14.53 | .89811 | 80.5 | .660 |
| Inactive | 9 | 16.06 | 1.21429 |
| *Professional Enhancement* |
| Active | 20 | 15.55 | .56034 | 79.0 | .627 |
| Inactive | 9 | 13.78 | .55551 |
| *Other’s Perceptions* |
| Active | 20 | 14.88 | .77332 | 87.5 | .908 |
| Inactive | 9 | 15.28 | .46956 |
| *Note:*\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. |

There were no significant differences found among active and inactive Master Gardener volunteers in any of the volunteerism preferences categories. The researchers note that if a similar study was conducted among a larger sample size, it is possible that differences among volunteer preferences could occur.

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| Table 6Fisher’s Exact test for Master Gardener tenure beyond 4 years and volunteerism preferences |
| Volunteerism Preferences | Active | Inactive  | *Χ*2 | *p* | φ |
| *f* | % | *F* | % |
| **Educational Project Preference** |
| Delivering oral presentations/programs | 11 | 55% | 3 | 33.3% | 1.17 | .43 | -.20 |
| Exhibits at fairs/festivals/markets | 7 | 35% | 3 | 33.3% | .01 | 1.00 | -.02 |
| Demonstration Garden Development | 10 | 50% | 4 | 44.4% | .08 | 1.00 | -.05 |
| Writing newsletters/articles | 6 | 30% | 2 | 22.2% | .19 | 1.00 | -.08 |
| 4-H youth activities | 3 | 15% | 1 | 11.1% | .08 | 1.00 | -.05 |
| Publicity/advertising | 2 | 10% | 0 | 0% | .97 | 1.00 | -.18 |
| Greenhouse propagation | 3 | 15% | 3 | 33.3% | 1.27 | .34 | .21 |
| Community service projects | 13 | 65% | 8 | 88.9% | 1.77 | .37 | .25 |
| Fundraising activities | 6 | 30% | 0 | 0% | 3.40 | .14 | -.34 |
| Facilitating meetings/trainings | 17 | 85% | 6 | 66.7% | 1.27 | .34 | -.21 |
| Committee leadership | 5 | 25% | 1 | 11.1% | .73 | .63 | -.16 |
| Volunteer development | 3 | 15% | 0 | 0% | 1.51 | .53 | -.23 |
| **Project Timeline Preference** |
| Ongoing | 11 | 55% | 5 | 55.6% | .001 | 1.00 | -.001 |
| Finite | 9 | 45% | 4 | 44.4% |

**Conclusions**

Respondents indicated that a majority of volunteers in the Walton County Master Gardener volunteer program are highly educated (at least a four-year degree) white women more than 66 years old with a median annual income of more than $75,000.

Reinforcing Strong’s 2011 study, respondents of this survey also overwhelmingly reported the Learning construct as having “Much influence” and “Community Service” and “Socialization” as having moderate influence on Master Gardener volunteerism participation. Also, respondents indicated the “Vary Routine”, “Professional Enhancement”, and “Other’s Perceptions” constructs as having little to no influence on program participation. Further, respondents indicated that they prefer volunteer activities that specifically target these three constructs like “Facilitating Trainings”, “Community service projects”, “Demonstration Garden Development & Education”, and “Delivering Oral Presentations/Programs”.

Not only are females more likely to participate in the Master Gardener program, as previous studies have shown, but, among those who responded to the survey, they are also significantly more likely to stay and become long term volunteers.

**How to Use this Information**

Though the population under study and the sample surveyed were both quite small, the findings reported in the survey presented above have implications for the Walton County Master Gardener program, MG programs in other Florida counties and for Master Gardener volunteer coordinators:

* Extension agents can use this study as a supplement to the Strong and Harder study (2011) to understand why individuals are attracted to and ultimately volunteer with the Master Gardener program and better meet the volunteerism needs of those individuals by offering adequate, advanced programs and community service and socialization opportunities. If we know what our volunteers want and need, why not give it to them and enjoy more satisfied volunteers?
* MG programs should focus their resources on educational activities that correspond to the three primary motivational orientations that influence MG volunteerism (providing volunteers with learning opportunities, allowing them to give back to their communities, and allow time for interpersonal communication). Volunteers may become disenchanted with the program when these three needs are not being consistently met.

**Recommendations**

 Future research efforts could examine how the Florida Master Gardener volunteer program could consistently attract and retain underserved demographics. Also, given the sample size limitations of this study, a similar study across more counties and Master Gardener volunteer programs throughout the state would be useful to further explore possible relationships between demographic characteristics, motivational orientations and volunteer preferences on Master Gardener volunteer tenure.

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**Appendix**

**(Mergener’s 41 point scale**

Q4 Please select the extent of influence each statement had on your reasons for participating in the Master Gardener program.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very much influence (1) | Much influence (2) | Moderate influence (3) | Little influence (4) | Very little influence (5) |
| 1. Desire to feed an appetite for knowledge.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. To satisfy an inquiring mind.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. To satisfy intellectual curiosity.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. To seek knowledge for its own sake. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. To obtain practical benefit.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6. To respond to the fact that I am surrounded by people who continue to learn.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7. To improve my ability to serve mankind.  |  |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very much influence (1) | Much influence (2) | Moderate influence (3) | Little influence (4) | Very little influence (5) |
| 8. To prepare for community service.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. To be a more effective citizen.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10. To improve my community work.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11. To comply with the ethics of the horticulture industry.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12. To participate in group activities.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13. To become acquainted with individual people. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14. To share a common interest with someone else. |  |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very much influence (1) | Much influence (2) | Moderate influence (3) | Little influence (4) | Very little influence (5) |
| 15. To fulfill a need for personal associations. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16. To improve social relationships. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17. To get a break from routine of home or work. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18. To gain relief from boredom.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 19. To provide a contrast to the rest of my life. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20. To have a few hours away from home/work responsibilities. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 21. To stop myself from becoming stagnant. |  |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very much influence (1) | Much influence (2) | Moderate influence (3) | Little influence (4) | Very little influence (5) |
| 22. To provide contrast to my previous education.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 23. To escape the intellectual narrowness of my occupation. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 24. To give me a higher status on the job. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 25. To secure professional advancement. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 26. To fulfill my professional obligation.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 27. To fulfill requirements of a government agency.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 28. To help me earn a degree, diploma, or certificate. |  |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very much influence (1) | Much influence (2) | Moderate influence (3) | Little influence (4) | Very little influence (5) |
| 29. To maintain or improve my social position. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 30. To carry out the recommendations from some authority. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 31. To comply with my employer's policy. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 32. To comply with the fact that people with status and prestige attend adult education classes. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 33. To take part in an activity which is customary in the circles in which I move. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 34. To be accepted by others.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 35. To gain insight into human relationships.  |  |  |  |  |  |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very much influence (1) | Much influence (2) | Moderate influence (3) | Little influence (4) | Very little influence (5) |
| 36. To comply with recommendations from someone else. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 37. To keep up with others. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 38. To supplement a previous narrow education.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 39. To clarify what I want to be doing 5 years from now.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 40. To overcome the frustrations of day to day gardening.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 41. To acquire knowledge that will help with other courses. |  |  |  |  |  |