

## MASTER GARDENER COLLEGE – AND FOOD FOR THOUGHT

By George Graine, Member- MGC Advisory Team

The new growing season for many gardeners will start next April when you tug on the mower cord and hope for a voila moment. It is also time to execute the winter plan you visualized or to rejuvenate a tired or overgrown section of your landscape. Eventually in JUNE you will be admiring your spring planting accomplishments. Now what? Well.... June is Master Gardener College (MGC) month. Just what is this buzz about that takes place every year at VaTech, our land grant college and home of Virginia Cooperative Extension. MGC is the place where academics and fun come together for four days on the magnificent Blacksburg campus. This is the ideal respite that any serious gardener needs and nobody will quiz you on what is a Hokie nor will you have to take an exam on any college subject.

No doubt a dozen Fairfax attendees at the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual college will attest to the fact that this one location is where you will have an opportunity for self-development through advanced continuing education, meet people from all over the state, and find out about so many interesting and exciting programs and projects. In our free time we saw the always changing and improving Hahn Horticultural Gardens, checked out what was happening in downtown Blacksburg (walking distance from campus), and enjoyed varied impromptu gatherings on three different dorm floors.

What goes on in the classroom? In a word – lots. This year MGC offered three-dozen lectures by well known speakers and VaTech profs, eight workshops and labs, and even 14 tours. You could mix advanced master gardener training with some fun workshops such as making your own trough pot a.k.a., hypertufa, or a fairy garden workshop. Some Fairfax MGs who took the fairy garden workshop will probably apply this knowledge to our senior program, some will experiment and “landscape” a hypertufa, and maybe someone will use the idea for a children’s birthday party activity. Does this sound like transfer of training? Absolutely!

The academic subjects go way beyond the annual Fairfax training curriculum. We had an opportunity to learn from experts about digital photography as it applies to landscapes and plants and then sharing images and critiquing them afterward. We heard the truth about “frankenfoods,” that is, how and why your food is genetically modified. Have you heard the word micropropagation also known as tissue culture? We actually learned how to use this technique and took home teeny Boston Ferns. If fire ants march on Northern Virginia, we now know how to take care of this problem. Have you seen the advertisement for the “renowned” potato plant? At the budding and grafting lab you could take one of these babies home after performing the basic techniques. If you were inquisitive about how plants get their names, then botanical Latin got us to the root of the problem (pun intended). Do you have a drainage problem? We learned some tricks on either how to cope with or solve the problem.

Some examples of a few more classes that are often not considered in Fairfax, due to time constraints, were berry production in your landscape, poisonous plants, and for the culinary types, herbals and Mediterranean delights. We also had an opportunity to attend a communication class that featured Spanish in horticulture where we learned words and phrases that apply to gardening. Politically inclined? We listened to an unbiased discussion on recent progress being made by plant scientists using the tools of

biotechnology and molecular breeding to improve selected bio-fuel crops. If this subject seemed to be too heavy then there was always the wine tasting one evening but I will not go there.

By way of summary, MGC is an outstanding opportunity to hear experts on familiar topics and at the same time catch up with the latest research, learn about unfamiliar topics, perform hands-on lab techniques, and of course go on many and varied informational tours. We met many master gardeners, extension agents, and made new friends. This year more than 250 master gardeners attended the college. Will you plan to attend the 23<sup>rd</sup> MGC? The dates are June 24-27, 2010. This is your opportunity to expand your knowledge, forge new friendships, share experiences, and even have time for some fun. By the way, VaTech has an award winning food service with an incredible variety of tasty creations and endless choices of familiar favorites plus you cannot beat the cost.

Contact any of the folks who attended MGC-2009. They will be able to regale you with how MGC is such a worthwhile “happening.” Some are already making plans to attend college next year.

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