

# NEW OUTCOMES OF ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

## AUTHORS:

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## SITUATION

Trained volunteers help organizations provide essential programs in the community. Volunteers receive training on core curriculum or skills in exchange for sharing what they know with the community. Increasingly, volunteer coordinators teach volunteers how to use computers and web-based resources in their volunteer role. A secondary outcome of volunteer training is digital literacy.

Digital literacy is defined as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills” (American Library Association Office for Information Technology Policy, 2019).

## METHODS

Volunteers learn digital literacy skills through experiential, hands-on training to include:

- Learning skills and strategies:
  - Select and apply effective problem-solving skills to solve personal, academic, and community-based problems.
  - Apply skills to produce clear and coherent oral, written and electronic communication.
  - Analyze and interpret data (such as publications, graphs, tables, schedules, and charts) to support a hypothesis.
  - Use copyright and fair use concepts appropriately.
  - Develop digital literacy skills for everyday living and interpretation and comprehension.

## RESULTS

Volunteer training goes beyond horticulture to include leadership, teamwork and interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and research skills. During training, volunteers improved their digital literacy, “a vital meta-learning skill” (Cross, 2006) useful in the volunteer’s role and in his or her personal life. Ninety-nine percent (99%) (n=97) indicate the Master Gardener program increased their ability to research information. Seventy-one percent (71%) (n=65) replied the program helps them gain confidence in using new technology. Additionally, volunteers believe the program helps them feel healthier, provides time to be part of a group, and improves their mental health.

Overall, 99% feel they make a difference in the community. Hynes explains, “Participation in community groups and activities enriches us. These connections help build healthy,

productive, and happy lives and are essential to a community’s vibrancy. Successful connections allow each of us to build relationships and know where to turn in times of need; they also offer us multiple opportunities to contribute to our community” (Hynes, 2012, p. 19).

During 2018, 101 Master Gardeners (N=134) participated in a Qualtrics survey to measure personal wellness benefit(s) of their service to the MG program, providing a 75% response rate.

Volunteers indicated the following personal wellness benefits of participation in the UF/IFAS Extension Hillsborough County Master Gardener program:

**99%**  
INCREASED ABILITY  
to research information

**98%**  
ENABLED THEM TO HELP OTHERS

**97%**  
LEARNED NEW THINGS

**98%**  
HELPED THEM MEET AND INTERACT  
with other gardeners

**93%**  
ENABLED THEM TO BE  
PART OF A GROUP

**91%**  
IMPROVED THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

**88%**  
INCREASED SELF ESTEEM

**83%**  
HELPED THEM STAY  
PHYSICALLY ACTIVE

**77%**  
FELT PHYSICALLY HEALTHIER

**71%**  
GAINED CONFIDENCE  
in using new technology  
(such as the internet, webinars, social media,  
e-mail, mobile apps, etc.)

**66%**  
REDUCED THEIR STRESS LEVEL

**42%**  
HELPED THEM MAKE NEW CONTACTS  
that might help with business,  
career, and/or paid work

- Use effective task-completion strategies such as identifying needed resources and planning steps for completion.
- Summarize to recall and understand information from a variety of media sources for real-world application.
- Listening and speaking:
  - Demonstrate understanding and recall of information such as identifying the main idea, drawing conclusions, and forming opinions.
  - Retell and summarize an event, scenario, or recommendation.
  - Participate effectively in small and large group discussions.
  - Communicate and publish key concepts clearly and effectively in a variety of situations and to non-technical audiences using digital tools.
- Comprehension and utilization of information and communication technologies:
  - Consider factors that influence the design of a message, such as the intended audience, medium, purpose, and nature of the message.
  - Evaluate the quality and reliability of digital resources by considering accuracy, relevance, comprehensiveness, appropriateness, and bias.
- Demonstrate computer literacy:
  - Use computers and smart devices to conduct research for presentations, reports, or summaries.
  - Create, transmit, and receive electronic messages such as email.
  - Use effective time-management and organization skills to access a volunteer database/calendar, set goals and priorities, and to locate, organize, and sort information.
- Communication, collaboration, and interpersonal relationships:
  - Use basic communication skills to build positive relationships with peers and community.
  - Demonstrate cooperation and understanding with persons who are ethnically and culturally diverse.
  - Teach others how to access, interpret, and share information.
  - Demonstrate knowledge of online etiquette and computer safety.

## CONCLUSIONS

Digital literacy helps volunteers utilize technology to learn new things, assess and interpret valid information, increase efficacy, and share information with others. Digital literacy skills acquired in volunteer training may transfer to daily life such as home, social situations, and work. These skills benefit volunteers and the community by increased civic engagement, effective organizational leadership, and learning that can make a difference in society.

## CITATIONS

Adapted from Florida Department of Education standards available at <http://www.fldoe.org/academics/standards>

<https://digitalliteracy.gov>

<https://www.imls.gov/publications/building-digital-communities-framework-action>

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/09/25/whos-not-online-and-why>

[https://www.ntia.doc.gov/files/ntia/publications/exploring\\_the\\_digital\\_nation\\_-\\_americas\\_emerging\\_online\\_experience.pdf](https://www.ntia.doc.gov/files/ntia/publications/exploring_the_digital_nation_-_americas_emerging_online_experience.pdf)

