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## MG SPROUTS: A Project-in-a-Box Approach to Educational Programming

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## MG SPROUTS: A Project-in-a-Box Approach to Educational Programming

### Abstract

MG SPROUTS was developed as a "project-in-a-box" program, a self-contained educational programming tool for Extension agents working with master gardener Extension volunteers (MGEVs). The program design incorporates programmatic materials and project management materials and follows best management practices for volunteer management. MG SPROUTS was tested in four Georgia counties in spring 2015. Agents, program coordinators, and MGEVs provided postproject evaluation via an online survey. Both agents/coordinators and MGEVs who used the MG SPROUTS materials during the pilot study reported a satisfactory experience. The project-in-a-box approach to educational programming enables agents to provide a meaningful and satisfactory experience for MGEVs during educational program delivery.

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### Introduction

Research shows that the reasons people do not volunteer are tied directly to the management of volunteer programs (Hoffman & Engel, 2013; United Parcel Service, 1998). Rohs and Westerfield (1996) connected the motivation and retention of master gardener Extension volunteers (MGEVs) to volunteer management practices. "Train-the-trainer" programs have been demonstrated to gain efficiency in MGEV programs (VanDerZanden, 2001), but development of educational programming remains a priority of agents and program coordinators (Dorn & Relf, 2001).

MG SPROUTS was developed as an educational programming tool for agents working with MGEVs. This six-session literature-based youth horticulture program enables agents to delegate to MGEVs public requests for horticulture programming for youth audiences while also offering MGEVs a satisfactory volunteer experience. The MG SPROUTS Project Guide contains both programmatic materials (session plans, activities, worksheets, journal materials, take-home newsletters, and a project evaluation tool for each of the six sessions) and project management materials (role descriptions, planning timelines, sign-in sheets, registration forms, risk management resources, etc.). The program design incorporates best management practices for volunteer management, such as role definition, orientation, coaching, training, supervision, support, evaluation, and recognition. MG SPROUTS is designed to be a project-in-a-box: everything agents and MGEVs need

to successfully educate and evaluate learning wrapped up in one easy-to-replicate package. To assess its success as a project-in-a-box, MG SPROUTS was tested in four Georgia counties in spring 2015.

## Methodology

Four sites conducted MG SPROUTS pilot programs in spring 2015. MG SPROUTS was offered through a kindergarten classroom, a homeschool cooperative (ages 5–7), an after-school program cooperating with Boys & Girls Clubs (ages 7–8), and a community group at a library (ages 5–8). Agents and program assistants coordinating the sites and MGEVs involved in the pilot programming participated in a preproject training webinar 2 months before commencement of the pilot programs. The MG SPROUTS curriculum, resources, and expectations were reviewed. The pilot programs were conducted between January and April 2015. Agents, program assistants, and MGEVs participating in the MG SPROUTS pilot programs were asked to complete a postproject evaluation. Results of the pilot efforts and the evaluation survey were discussed during a debriefing webinar in May 2015.

## Results

Three agents, one program assistant, and 11 MGEVs participated in the preproject training webinar. One agent, two program assistants, 34 MGEVs, and the state MGEV coordinator directed the pilot programs. In total, 52 youth participated in the MG SPROUTS pilot programs. Sixteen individuals (one agent, two program assistants, 11 MGEVs, and two MGEV trainees) participated in the postproject evaluation (47% of pilot participants).

Ninety-four percent of evaluation respondents indicated that MG SPROUTS met its goal of introducing children to the joy and wonder of plants and gardening. Respondents identified modifications that could be made to improve the delivery and quality of each MG SPROUTS session. Additionally, the pilot team identified improvements that could be made to the program structure to enhance the MGEV and agent/program assistant experiences. Resistance to the project's evaluation tool, a graphic organizer used to assess learning among MG SPROUTS participants, was noted. Use of the tool necessitated revamping it and creating a scoring tool. Also, it was determined that clearer explanation is required during preproject training.

Overall means for satisfaction with the project experience are reported in Table 1. Compared to other MGEV programming that had occurred during the previous 2 years, the MG SPROUTS program left participants with a higher level of satisfaction. Respondents indicated that project elements were important to a satisfactory volunteer experience (Table 2), though agents and coordinators ranked the preproject training and project guide slightly higher (planning), and MGEVs placed more value on the planning meetings and final review sessions (communication). Postproject evaluation comments affirmed that "the webinar, the meetings, the planning and practice sessions served to make the MGEVs feel included, confident, and prepared, and build a strong and enthusiastic team." Planning meetings between MG SPROUTS sessions allowed MGEVs to practice their roles, test materials, and refine activities.

**Table 1.**

MGEV Satisfaction with MG SPROUTS Experience

<b>Compared to other MGEV projects for which you have volunteered in the last two years . . .</b>	<b>Agent/program coordinator mean response (on a 7-point Likert scale) (n = 3)</b>	<b>MGEV mean response (on a 7-point Likert scale) (n = 13)</b>	<b>Combined mean (on a 7-point Likert scale) (n = 16)</b>
How do you feel about your MG SPROUTS project experience?	6.67	6.23	6.73
How satisfied were you with your preparedness for each session?	6.33	6.23	6.67
How do you feel about the difference you made in your community?	6.00	5.62	6.07
How do you feel about the leadership provided by agent/coordinator?	2.00	6.30	6.77
How satisfied are you with your understanding of the project purpose?	6.67	6.23	6.73
How do you feel about the expectation to share final project results?	4.67	5.92	6.50

**Table 2.**  
Importance of Project Components

<b>Please indicate how important the following items were to your MG SPROUTS experience.</b>	<b>Agent/program coordinator mean response (on a 7-point Likert scale) (n = 3)</b>	<b>MGEV mean response (on a 7-point Likert scale) (n = 10)</b>	<b>Combined mean (on a 7-point Likert scale) (n = 13)</b>
Pre-project training webinar	6.67	4.50	5.42
Project Leader Guide	6.67	5.00	6.36
Role descriptions	5.67	5.20	5.75
Team planning meetings	6.00	6.60	6.46
Final review session	6.33	6.60	6.54

## Conclusions

Both agents/coordinators and MGEVs who used the MG SPROUTS project-in-a-box materials during

the pilot phase had a satisfactory experience. MGEVs felt prepared (6.23 mean out of 7) and were satisfied with leadership provided by their agent/coordinator (6.3 mean out of 7).

Agents/coordinators indicated satisfaction with the program and its purpose (6.67 mean out of 7).

The project-in-a-box approach to educational programming enables agents to provide a meaningful and satisfactory experience for MGEVs during educational program delivery.

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