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Electronic "Ask a Master Gardener" Answers Gardening Questions

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Electronic "Ask a Master Gardener" Answers Gardening Questions

Abstract

After 7 months, a new electronic system of answering e-mail gardening questions from the public had received 1,042 questions. Thirteen Master Gardeners throughout Minnesota access the questions and respond to clients within 48 hours. Answers are posted on a WebBoard™ at the site for anyone to read. Questions are similar to the traditional gardening questions handled on the phone hotlines, with trees and perennials being the most popular topic. The public appreciates the flexibility and convenience of the program.

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In May 2001, a new electronic consumer horticulture answering service was introduced by the University of Minnesota Extension Service called "Ask a Master Gardener." Thirteen Master Gardener volunteers representing 10 counties across the state answer e-mail questions from the public. The "Ask a Master Gardener" Web site <<http://www.extension.umn.edu/projects/yardandgarden/askmg.html>> is linked to the Yard & Garden Line homepage <<http://www.extension.umn.edu/projects/yardandgarden/>>.

The Yard & Garden Line, established in 1998, is a telephone-based consumer garden information service that can be called, toll free, from anywhere in Minnesota. Callers select from several options, including:

- Talking with University staff at the Yard & Garden Clinic (for a \$5 flat fee),
- Ordering Extension publications,
- Requesting soil test sample collection materials,
- Listening to pre-recorded tapes on various subjects, or
- Leaving a message for a Master Gardener in the callers' home county to return their call.

With one phone number, consumers can access a wide variety of Extension information.

The Yard & Garden Line (Y & GL) is the successor to Dial U, a telephone-based insect and plant information service started in 1983. Several states use a phone or hotline system to answer public questions (Patterson, 1995; Joh & Barkley, 2001). Dial U established a Web presence in 1996. In 1998 it was changed to reflect all the offerings of the Y & GL. Links to all of the choices on the Y& GL are available, as well as additional information such as Y & GL Briefs (fact sheets), plant disease diagnostics, and insects. An electronic newsletter, the *Y & GL News*, was started in April 1999. The current issue and a searchable back issues archive are prominent features of the Y & GL Web site.

Public interest in an e-mail information source was evident when the *Y & GL News* editor began to receive unsolicited e-mail gardening queries. Some respondents simply asked where they could

ask a question by e-mail.

Methods and Materials

To handle submission of consumers' gardening questions, the Information Technology team at the University of Minnesota Extension Service created a Web input page that requests name, e-mail address, and Minnesota county of residence plus the question. This information goes into an electronic mail discussion list (Mailman 2.0.5 ♦ Free Software Foundation, Inc.) that, in turn, e-mails the query to the Master Gardener volunteers.

The Master Gardener members select the questions they wish to answer and then post their responses to the "Ask a Master Gardener" WebBoard™ (WebBoard 5.0.208 ♦ 2001 ChatSpace). Addresses of the inquirer or Master Gardener are never revealed, only that of the moderator. Inquiries are not visible to the public, which also enables screening non-horticultural or inappropriate questions.

Master Gardeners were selected to work in the program based on recommendations from their county educator and to some extent on their participation in the Master Gardener e-mail discussion list (Meyer & Banks, 2000). Experience in answering questions or previous hotline work, computer or e-mail comfort, and location in the state were also considered.

The Master Gardener volunteers were then trained (via e-mail) on how to access and respond to the questions. Master Gardeners try to answer questions from their area of the state, but are not limited to respond to any kind of question. Response time is posted on the site as "within 48 hours," and to date this response time has been met.

Results and Discussion

Over 1,000 questions were received and answered in the first 7 months of operation, May 1 to December 1, 2001 (Table 1). The vast majority of questions came from Minnesota, but approximately 3% came from other states or counties (Table 2). An additional 3% cannot be determined because clients did not select a county or mention a geographic location and have a national e-mail addresses (AOL, Hotmail, etc.)

Table 1.
Questions by Month for University of Minnesota Extension Service "Ask a Master Gardener", May-November 2001

Month	Number
May	211
June	200
July	161
August	150
September	122
October	119
November	79
Total	1,042

Table 2.
Origin of Questions Received on University of Minnesota Extension Service "Ask a Master Gardener", May-November 2001

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Location	Number	%
Minnesota	980	94
Other States	20 ¹	2
Countries	11 ²	1
Unavailable	31	3
¹ Illinois (4); Wisconsin (3); Iowa (2); Maine, California, Texas, S. Dakota (1 each) ² Canada (6), Australia (2), England (2), Portugal (1)		

Questions from other states are answered if possible, but inquiries pertaining to pesticides or plants not hardy to USDA Zone 4 are referred to their home state Extension service. Questions generally are similar to the traditional gardening questions handled on phone hotlines, with trees and perennials being the most popular topics (Table 3).

Table 3.
Questions Received on University of Minnesota Extension Service "Ask a Master Gardener" Electronic Web site by topic, May-November 2001

Topic	Number
Trees	221
Perennials	145
Trees and Shrubs	124
Lawns	115
Insects	104
Vegetables	77
Fruit	66
Miscellaneous	66
Shrubs	51
Bulbs	43
Landscaping	35
Wildlife	34

House Plants	33
Annuals	29
Weeds	27
Roses	25
Vines	21
Soils	19

Master Gardeners often end a response by recommending additional written resources such as Extension publications or bulletins, and these are hot linked at the end of the message. Questions are answered through board postings only and become the content of a public site for teaching horticulture. The questions and answers serve as a gardening and educational resource for other Master Gardeners, as well as the general public.

The WebBoard™ where all answers are posted has several enhancements, including a search feature of all postings and a listing of questions by topic. Consumers can go to the site and look for similar questions or read other questions that have been already answered.

Master Gardeners who work on the e-mail answering service are comfortable with the system. They indicate it takes longer to type a concise response than to speak on the telephone. However, the lack of dialogue eliminates the need for in-depth questioning in order to make an exact and definitive response.

The Master Gardeners feel the public really likes this method: "they can ask anything, there is no dumb question." Clients can take time to thoughtfully compose their question and check back at their leisure. Responses are more "permanent" than phone conversations and can be reread as needed. Master Gardeners did indicate some frustration with the system (the order of posting messages) and the age-old issue of repetitive questions-- consumers asking questions already answered on the site. Volunteers also appreciate the flexibility and can contribute their hours at odd times at their convenience.

E-mail takes more time to compose than answering a phone call and is inefficient in determining the actual environment of the plant in question. However, public response has been high, with minimal promotion of the site. A link to "Ask a Master Gardener" was featured on the University of Minnesota Extension's homepage <<http://www.extension.umn.edu>> for 1 week in the summer. An Extension specialist has also talked about the program on radio gardening programs.

The "Ask a Master Gardener" electronic format has been popular with the public due to its flexible nature, "always open" schedule, and individual, "personal" response.

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