



SDSU Extension Master Gardener Ruth Smith prepares for a local spring plant sale. Photos by Billy Gibson.

MASTER GARDENERS

Extension Program Seeks to Spread the Love of Gardening

Billy Gibson

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Sorry, Walt Disney. The happiest place on earth for Ruth Smith isn't located in Florida or California. It's found in the serene confines of her garden in Pierre, S.D.

A retired educator, Smith experiences relaxation and contentment while growing herbs, vegetables and florals in her terraced backyard garden. After spending a career in public education and dedicating herself to the development and guidance of local students, Smith now finds her bliss by focusing her efforts on cultivating fresh produce and plants.

She even confesses a proud affinity for something that most people absolutely abhor – weeding.

"I actually like weeding. I like tending to the plants and bringing them up with some tender loving care," Smith said. "I always tell people this is my happy place. Some people like to take a boat out on the river or go hunting. This is what we like to do."

The "we" Smith refers to includes her husband, Mark. Both enjoy gardening and both have been through the Master Gardener program administered by South Dakota State University Extension.

As current president of the Prairie Potters Master Gardeners Club based in Pierre, Smith is an enthusiastic proponent of serving as an ambassador for horticulture education both locally and throughout the state. She and Mark completed the training

and course work required to become Master Gardeners about 10 years ago, although Mark is currently on "inactive" status.

The goal of the program is to turn gardening enthusiasts into expert volunteers who share their research-based knowledge with community members across the state. Since the program's inception in 1985, more than 400 Master Gardeners have logged nearly 80,000 hours of volunteer service answering questions from the public and hosting community programs.

It's that public interaction that interests Smith. She enjoys attending local farmer markets, plant sales, workshops, school programs and other community events.

"The fun part is getting out among people and helping them solve



Mark Smith repairs a retaining wall in front of his home in Pierre.

Master Gardener Clubs in SD

Club Name	Area
Brookings Area Master Gardeners	Brookings
Coteau Prairie Master Gardeners	Watertown
Custer County Master Gardeners	Custer
Dakota Prairie Master Gardeners	Miller
Fall River Master Gardeners	Hot Springs
Garden Gate Master Gardeners	Winner
Harding County Master Gardeners	Buffalo
Huron Area Master Gardeners	Huron
Minnehaha Co.	Sioux Falls
Missouri Valley Master Gardeners	Yankton
Northern Hills Master Gardeners	Spearfish
Pennington County Master Gardeners	Rapid City
Perkins County Master Gardeners	Bison
Prairie Partners Master Gardeners	Aberdeen
Prairie Potters Master Gardeners	Pierre
South Central Master Gardeners	White River

any problems they're encountering and giving them suggestions on how they can get better results for their efforts," she said. "We love to have conversations with people and we're not afraid to say we don't know something. We can always find out the answers and get back with them."

So, what's the question she gets asked the most? "Hmmm. It's probably, 'Something is wrong with my tomato plants. What should I do?'"

Rhoda Burrows is a horticulture specialist with SDSU Extension and works frequently with Master Gardeners. She said interest in the program has grown since the pandemic struck in March of 2020. While participants weren't allowed to attend in-person events as representatives of the program through most of last year, online teleconferences were held with many new prospects joining in.

"It's just such a fun group to work with," she said. "They're so enthusiastic and they have a deep hunger for knowledge and a heart for helping out each other in their communities. After the pandemic when people were restricting their movements, they discovered that gardening can be a good, wholesome family activity. Gardening is a source of fresh produce and more people are appreciating the benefits of healthy eating."

More information about the Master Gardeners program can be found by visiting www.extension.sdstate.edu. Those interested in becoming part of the program can contact SDSU's Extension Master Gardener Coordinator Aimee House Ladonski at 605-782-3290.

McCrory Gardens is an Inspiration for Horticulture Hobbyists

Gardeners are typically passionate self-starters and don't require much outside motivation. But McCrory Gardens is an ideal place to go for those gardeners looking for an ounce of inspiration over the summer months.

Created in 2012 on the Brookings campus of South Dakota State University, McCrory Gardens features a 25-acre garden and 45-acre arboretum along with a 9,300-square-foot Education and Visitor Center.

While visitation was down in 2020, McCrory Gardens is expecting a busy summer and welcomes gardening enthusiasts to see the ever-changing display of flowers, vegetables, herbs and more.

New to the facility this summer is a Native American medicinal garden area, a "three-sisters" garden with beans, corn and squash, as well as a pollinator garden designed to attract bees and butterflies. Professors and instructors from the Native American studies department collaborated as consultants on the project.



McCrory Gardens is open to visitors on Wednesday through Sunday, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"There is always something new that's growing and blooming, and we have numerous annual beds that are planted each year," said Director Lisa Marotz.

What is expected to be a spectacular summer will culminate in the annual Garden Party held each year on the first Friday in August. While plans are still being finalized, past events have included food vendors, live music, games and free admission for the day.

"Pretty much everything we have is in bloom at that time. We want to invite everyone to come out and see what we have to offer," Marotz said.

McCrory Gardens is a privately-funded \$4.2-million facility that was the vision of founder and SDSU professor S.A. McCrory.

Last August, McCrory Gardens was named as a benefactor of an endowment from the estate of Frank and Mildred Denholm. A gift of more than \$422,000 went to the gardens while an additional gift of the same amount went to The South Dakota Agricultural Heritage Museum, which is hosting an exhibit entitled, "Electrifying Rural South Dakota," through Sept. 1.