

WHAT'S GARDENING GOOD FOR?

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Introduction

When Charlie Mazza asked me if I would be willing to speak with you here tonight, he said that he wanted me to focus on “how Master Gardeners have signed onto a large societal purpose.” He wanted me to convey the message to you that Master Gardeners “are more than gardeners and more than fact tellers.” He wanted me to talk about the “spirit” of extension work, and your role in it.

These are the themes I'll be speaking about tonight.

I want to start with an observation that might sound a little like I want to rain on your party. The observation is simply this:

Up against the big pressing problems of our time, problems like the loss of decent jobs, increasing disparities of wealth, a shrinking tax base and rising taxes, terrorism and war (just to name a few), gardening seems, well, *trivial*.

It's not going to turn the economy around. It's not going to provide us with thousands of good jobs. It's not going to transform our political and economic systems. It's not going to bring peace and security.

Given this, we might well ask: *What's gardening good for?*

And here are a few more questions we might ask, given the tremendous squeeze on taxpayers these days, and on the resources that government has to spend on public services and programs:

Why should educational organizations like Cornell University and Cornell Cooperative Extension, organizations that are funded in large part with people's hard-earned tax dollars, be involved in gardening? Can gardening be a medium for meaningful education—that is, for education that really matters? If so, what kind of education, and what is *it* good for?

There are, it turns out, some very good answers to these questions. I'm sure each of you could offer some. The ones I want to share with you come from the work and experience of three educators who work in and through gardens: Renee Schloupt, Sally Cunningham, and Marcia Eames-Sheavly.

Renee Schloupt

Playing the role of the skeptic (this is something professors are especially well trained to do), I recently asked Renee Schloupt, an extension educator from Broome County, what she thought gardening is good for. She laughed at me, amused, I think, by my asking such an obvious question.

“I could give you a list a mile long,” she said.

“OK,” I said. “So what’s on the top of the list for you?”

“It’s a creative and social outlet,” Renee explained.

And it’s an icebreaker. Everybody can connect with it, whether they have 50 acres or a houseplant on their windowsill. Even my husband who grew up in Brooklyn. We’re part of the earth, and everyone at some level can connect with it. And it’s very soothing. It’s just a wonderful thing, at all levels.

It’s about people. It’s about the earth. It’s about the connection of people and the earth and how they’re interrelated, and how they depend on one another. The earth depends on the people to do the right thing for it, and the people are depending on the earth to give them bounty and beauty.

“My job as an educator,” Renee went on to tell me,

is to put the 2 together in the best possible way. What I’m committed to as an educator, more than anything else, is to convince people that yes, they can do something; yes, they can have a beautiful garden; yes, they can have vegetables, and they can do it without harming the environment. That’s the main focus.

OK, I said. That sounds good. But, still playing the skeptic, I asked Renee why we should support this work with our tax dollars. What’s it really good for, in real, concrete, tangible terms? What does the public get out of it?

Renee was quick to answer me.

“I don’t know if you saw the newspaper this weekend, the big article about the Susquehanna River?” she asked.

Well, a large percentage of the pollution going into the Susquehanna River isn’t coming from farmers. It’s coming from suburbia. It’s coming from homeowners that are applying pesticides to their lawns. And a lot of the education that we do, especially on the hotline, is: Okay, so you want to apply crabgrass killer to your yard? Okay, when should you apply it? How much do you apply? How should you apply it? And it’s education like that.

Many people out there love the Scott's 4-step lawn care plan. But the Scott's 4-step lawn care plan is about 2-3 steps too much, applied at incorrect times. So a lot of what we do is education that not only helps homeowners save money, but also helps our environment.

Renee told me a little about the master gardeners she works with in Broome County. One of their main projects is to care for the Cutler Botanical Garden, to design and maintain it as a resource for the community's learning. They develop an "overwhelming sense of pride and dedication to Cutler Garden," Renee told me.

I mean the dedication is just absolutely amazing. We were out here last year planting trees in the snow, and I'm out here with an 89 year old man. We have an 89 year old intern and he's out there on his hands and knees, in the snow, digging a hole. It's just totally amazing, you know?

I only got to talk with Renee for half an hour or so. But in that short time I learned something important about what gardening is good for. I learned how gardening *can* be a medium for meaningful education. And I learned what Charlie asked me to communicate to you tonight.

If you sign on as a Master Gardener in Broome County and you work with Renee, you'll be signing onto a larger societal purpose. You'll be signing onto the work of caring for the earth. As Renee puts it, "The earth depends on the people to do the right thing for it. And the people are depending on the earth to give them bounty and beauty. My job as an educator is to put the 2 together in the best possible way."

When you sign on as a Master Gardener in Broome County, you sign on to be more than a gardener, and more than a fact teller. You become an educator who takes on the job first, of helping people do the right thing for the earth, and second, of helping people produce bounty and beauty. Your job, as Renee puts it, will be to "put the 2 together in the best possible way."

Can you think of a larger societal purpose than this?

Sally Cunningham

We can learn more from Sally Cunningham about what gardening is good for, of how it serves as a medium for meaningful education, and of the larger societal purpose a Master Gardener serves. Until Cornell Cooperative Extension in Erie County lost its county funding earlier this year, Sally was the educator in charge of Erie County's Master Gardener program.

A couple years ago, a group of students and I had the chance to spend a semester learning about the community education work that extension educators in Erie County pursue. In my classes, I ask students to conduct in-depth, tape-recorded interviews with educators, both as a means for advancing students' learning about the work of extension and community education, and as a means for supporting educators' own reflection and learning. The interviews are transcribed and edited into something we call practitioner profiles. The profiles work like windows into educators' motivations, purposes, practices and experiences. We learn a lot from them about what educators really do in their work, beyond their job descriptions and titles. We learn about their purposes and passions, and what they aim to accomplish. We learn how they deal with the challenges they encounter, and how they make sense of their experiences.

One of my students interviewed Sally about her work with Master Gardeners. Reading her profile, it's clear that she really loves her work. And it's clear, too, that she loves Master Gardeners. "It's very heartening to watch Master Gardeners," Sally says.

If you ever lack faith in humanity, hang out with some Master Gardeners. It's the truth, because they usually do bring out the best. It may have something to do with the nature of horticulture as our medium, and the nature of gardeners in general. They're just a positive bunch of people. They believe in next spring. They're always looking to the future, tend to have patience, tend to think in processes and systems. And they understand it takes investment in A, B, and C before you get to M, N, and O.

In her profile, which will be published later this year, Sally relates a brief story from her work in the city of Buffalo. I want to share it with you. "I've created basic gardening classes in different parks," Sally says,

in three different locations in Buffalo, where the Master Gardeners and I teach. Some of these Master Gardeners are teaching their first class and some of them have been doing this for twenty years. Some of them are going into parts of the city they never went to before. So there are a lot of different adventures going on.

I'll tell about the first project on the East side of Buffalo, in one of the more impoverished neighborhoods. It was in a big building that functions as a senior center called "Friends to the Elderly." I had invited community leaders and community garden group leaders. They were mostly elderly ladies who are powerhouses in their neighborhoods.

Not knowing who would come, I had the Master Gardeners and myself all ready to do a two-hour class. We got there at one o'clock, ready to go, and one person

was there. So disheartening. But then, two and then three people, and then a bus came from another section of town with one of those little powerful ladies bringing six people. Then came another van with another little frail-looking powerhouse who brought another four people. We ended up with twenty people and a wonderful class.

The class was about soil and compost. Real breakthroughs were occurring. One of them was with a young woman, an employee of Friends to the Elderly, who was sent by her boss. Her boss said, "You got to learn how to take care of the flowers around this building." She was thinking, "What a pain," but as we taught, light was breaking through.

Her first question, after people had been talking about raised beds, was, "I'll be the stupid one. So what is a raised bed, anyway?" So the Master Gardeners realized, hah, we hadn't gotten it across. And they went back a little. After that, she said, "Oh, I could do that!"

She said, "Last year I went out in my backyard. I wanted to grow some flowers. I started poking with a stick and a shovel, and I said forget this, I don't know what I'm doing," and she went back in the house and never did anything. "But this year," she said, "That's what I have to do? I can do that."

And suddenly she knew how to make compost and how to build up a raised bed. She could get some boards and so forth, and all of a sudden she was excited. She's got the job pruning the shrubs around her workplace, so now she's motivated. She was one breakthrough.

There was another young man sitting there who was also sort of shuffled off to this class because he was hanging out to drive the bus or something. He sat there, and it was like dawn breaking through. I was talking about picking up other people's leaves and using your kitchen scraps, like coffee grounds and fruits and vegetables, to make compost. This young man said, "Now wait a minute, let me get this. You take the garbage? You put it in the dirt? And then it's *this*?" We passed around the soil. "And it turns into *this*?" he said. "You've got to be kidding me." Wonderful! It was just like he was in wonderment.

So there was a light dawning. When you have those moments, you know it's real teaching, that they're getting something. This young man and the others even asked, "Why doesn't everybody do this? Why do we throw our leaves in the dump?" And I said, "Yeah, that's it. You've got it. We need to teach everybody don't we? So let's get all the neighborhood leaves into these piles in your neighborhood and in the community lots, and let's do this." We talked about the problems of urban composting, and people who are afraid it will bring rats, and what you do to prevent that. So we got into the real nitty gritty, and had breakthroughs on larger societal issues. It was wonderful!

Sally talks a lot more about her work, telling us many other little stories, each as rich as the last. And she also tells us about how she views her job as an educator. “My job,” she says,

is all about introducing people to the systems of how it all works, whether that’s out in nature or applicable to practical solutions in everyday life, and how these things work in their own communities. It’s getting them to think about systems. To me, what we’ve been doing is truly what education is supposed to be: *educara*, to lead. We are leading people into real learning, real thinking. Once you start them on that path, there is no end to what people can do in solving problems for themselves. It’s how to think about problems, how to ask the questions and follow a concept through to the end.

In my educational approach, I like watching my students catch on to the nature systems and how they work. They begin to understand that you can never do just one thing, like kill a bug, because this thing has to do with the next prey it was eating. In the same sense, whether it is our societal systems or whether it’s in nature’s systems, your impact on a child or your impact on a butterfly all has to do with a larger connection.

In showing people the connections, you are doing a lot of the real education. Like that example with the guy, saying that you don’t have to put your leaves on your street in the garbage dump, but you can get them back into the soil. Well, he just hadn’t ever seen the close system that Mother Nature has worked out between the soil and the tree leaves.

I think we can get people to have a little reverence and wonder at all the things insects are doing and how many of them are out there cooperating. If we can get people to be a little bit respectful of such a simple living thing, that translates upward into a huge need in our society. We have people in cities, and even children in the suburbs, sitting behind computers who have never walked in the woods, never climbed a tree, never smelled the soil or laid down in a field.

I care particularly about teaching people a respect for life and a respect for the awe of nature and its systems. I also teach the idea that we aren’t all in charge here. We’re not all controlling everything. You don’t have to go out and buy a product to kill a bug. Rather, the more you understand about how it all works, the less you need to do that controlling thing.

I really do think our society needs more people to think like that, instead of those who see an ant in the house and go infect everybody by spraying two cans of Raid. I definitely think people need help, because they’ve lost touch with what our grandparents knew about nature. They knew that there are natural systems going on around us, and it’s not the end of the world if a spider got in the living room. So I have a strong sense of mission of the content we teach. But the

gardening medium is also a great way to reach people with other values and skills as well.

Sally helps us see and appreciate the importance both of the content we teach in the Master Gardeners program, the scientific knowledge and practical wisdom about plants and nature, and of the gardening skills we teach. But as she also tells us, and helps us to see with her stories, that gardening can be a medium for “reaching people with other values and skills.” For Sally, the content extension has, knowledge about horticulture, nutrition, youth, or whatever, is the “vehicle” for teaching and developing larger things.

Here’s how she puts it with respect to gardening:

I think the content is the vehicle. It’s what we get known for. It’s why people come to us, whether it’s the greenhouse expert or the dairy agent or the nutrition person or the gardening lady. They’re going to come to us for the content. But when they do, they also get the larger life principles: learning how to learn, how to think, how to research, how to solve problems for themselves. They get a lot more than quick answers in all of our content areas, but we still need the gardening as the lure to get them in the door. You know, they’re not going to come to a meeting on “How Do You Be a Better Citizen.” Nobody would come to meetings on that. But they come to a “Gardening in your Community” class, and pretty soon, they’re interacting with people they wouldn’t have talked to before, and so forth. So it’s a great medium.

Sally gives us her own answer to the question, What’s gardening good for? According to her,

Gardening is a great medium to improve the quality of life for individuals and communities, which is a whole lot like the extension mission. There is nothing like gardening for giving people something they can achieve themselves with no or minimal money. It encourages cooperation, enhances understandings of interactions at all levels, from plant-people interaction to all other forms of life. And it teaches skills that range from personal awareness to science concepts to patience to the phenomenon of cause and effect, meaning that the things you do have positive or negative results.

So I really think that horticulture isn’t just another subject matter. I really think it’s the big one. It’s a huge medium for larger societal and individual growth.

Marcia Eames-Sheavly

Marcia Eames-Sheavly, a senior extension associate in the Department of Horticulture at Cornell, shares Sally's conviction about the larger potential of gardening for societal and individual growth. Among other things, Marcia serves as the 4-H Garden Based Learning program leader. Here's how she talks about what horticulture and gardening means to her:

What gets me excited is not so much the plants, but the plants as an avenue through which we can create human and community well being. I mean that just really thrills me. It's accessible, it's inexpensive, it's time honored. It's amazing the change that plants and gardens can make in a community and in an individual's life. So that's what gets me going. It's not just the plants but how they have an impact on us, on a number of levels.

In terms of the kinds of impacts that plants and gardens have on us, often we think about food; for example, in this department, *healthy* food. Or we'll talk about the act of growing plants as being healthy for us, and I think that's important. But it's just so much more. Plants have an impact on our well being just by their virtue of being beautiful.

Sometimes I think we almost are embarrassed about that as a community of horticulturalists. That's kind of a fluffy thing. I don't think it is. I think it's huge. We need now, more than ever, beauty in our lives. And plants can provide that.

More and more, I think people are concerned about the disconnect that people have from nature and their surroundings. And the garden can be an avenue through which we reconnect.

The idea of gardens as avenues for people to reconnect with nature and their surroundings isn't just an abstract theory for Marcia. She's lived it. She's experienced it. More importantly, she's served as a catalyst for making it happen.

Several years ago, Marcia served as a volunteer on a site-based management team for the elementary school her oldest son was attending in Freeville, a little village not far from here in Tompkins County. In Marcia's words,

This is a local school that has had some difficulty. From my perspective, many of the teachers seemed sort of frustrated and even outright demoralized. It was at a difficult point in this school's life. We were talking about what would be a project that we could engage in that would rally people around something that we could feel good about and do, and feel a sense of accomplishment. It seemed to me that a garden might be a really wonderful way to go.

So I threw it out to this committee: "What do you think about this idea?" The idea was a very small, manageable school garden for students in grades K-4 that would pull this school community together [and] connect to the curriculum, so that it wasn't just an exercise in creating a garden.

What we did first was, we batted the idea around: “What do you think about a garden?” [And people said,] “It makes a lot of sense. We have a lot of room, we don’t have anything like that. It could offer experiential learning for our students. We can do this. It’s manageable. We’ll do something really small and we’ll do well at it.”

An important part of Marcia’s story is her effort to make the garden project a community project, rather than her personal project. As she puts it, it couldn’t be an “I” project, it had to be a “we” project. She explains:

In a community-based project, you want it to be “we.” And so at the same time that I was initiating this and moving it forward, it was very important that “I” be a “we.” What I did was bring up the idea and suggest a process. So I organized this whole effort, but I kept pulling in people at various points along the way to own it, to move it forward in their own fashion.

Marcia also had to work to slow the process down. “This may not sound earth shattering,” she says,

but often people will do a community-based project and they’ll just do it. I spent a year *not* doing it, trying to think of everybody that needed to know or needed to be involved.

What often happens is, people get excited about an idea of a garden, and they get out the rototiller. But this committee took a year to plan it before ever digging up the ground. We talked about our approach, we planned what kind of a garden we wanted, and we met with each grade level to see what kind of theme might work with what the students were learning. So we were very thoughtful about the process. We spoke with the principal, the custodian, with parents, with the groundskeeper. We talked to everyone who would possibly have an opinion about this before moving forward.

I remember it was from September to April that we spent planning all the facets of the garden. I wasn’t so much wrapped up with what plants were going to go into it as I was wanting it to be really, really well organized. I was more at the helm with the “who” part, [asking,] who are we going to involve? Who? Asking the questions about who will be doing the maintenance for this program, who needs to know, how do we get people excited about it, how do we guarantee that people are going to care for this, that it won’t be vandalized, that they’re going to own it, how do we create excitement among the students?

[To the] committee, I said, “You know, we could easily do this ourselves. We could do this ourselves. We could go out on a Saturday morning. The garden is small, we could do it easily. But let’s think of how to be as inefficient as we

possibly can. How can we involve so many people with this, that people will feel that it's their garden?

We sent a note home to every child in the primary school, in the elementary school, saying that we're having a big bed building and want everyone there. We invited all the children. I remember asking the McDonalds and the Dunkin Donuts to contribute food. I sent a notice to the police department and fire department, letting them know we were doing this and please join us. I think I even sent a note to all the service groups, the Rotary. Imagine taking this simple garden and making it into a three-ring circus. We wanted everyone in town there.

Marcia describes what happened the day of the big bed building:

On a rainy Saturday morning in April we made the garden. 120 people showed up in the rain. Tons of children. The school principal was there, the groundskeeper. What we did was we mixed soil and compost in the parking lot and a couple hundred yards away we had people building the beds.

And so we built the beds, we mixed the soil. I had arranged, I don't know how many buckets there were, maybe 50 buckets, and rather than take a backhoe and put the soil into the garden, which would take about five minutes, we lined all 120 people up from the parking lot to the beds and they passed the soil for an hour and a half. And the kids all year would point to the spot where they dumped the soil from their buckets and say, "That's mine, that's my spot, I did that."

Because we had 120 people there, 120 people owned that garden that day. It was a very, very simple bed structure, but a heck of a lot of people made it. The principal, she was just circulating and talking to people and there were people in the school bringing out coffee and sandwiches and donuts to the people who were working all morning.

When we left, we had done this really incredible community thing. I realized later that summer that my deep seated goal of wanting to disappear, not wanting to be seen as a foreman, came true when someone came up to me and said, "Did you see what they did here?" And my inner reaction was, "*They?*" I mean, I initiated this whole thing. But she said, "Come here, I want to show you something," and brought me over to this garden which was in full bloom and was just extraordinary.

She said, "Look what they did" and then explained this whole process to me. "There was this day and all these people came together in the community and they created this thing and it's amazing. And my child was the one that put this here" And I stood there talking to her and realized that it's a community thing. It isn't identified as one person's project, which was really important to me. Everyone, *everyone* owned it.

So what did gardening turn out to be good for in Marcia's story? How does her story help answer the questions I posed earlier?

In Marcia's own words,

[I think it taught people that] if we all work together toward a common vision, we can do something extraordinary. Something extraordinary in this case may not seem like much, a small garden. But for a community of folks who were feeling that they couldn't achieve or maybe hadn't had a success in a while, it was a really big deal.

[There's] the whole benefit of the product, the amazing appearance of a garden and what it can do for people's souls. It looks extraordinary. Food comes out of it. There are educational things we can learn from it. We can celebrate it and have celebration and events around it. Our children can reconnect with nature, see a butterfly, watch a bird feed.

The benefits are also from participating in the process, what we learned about that, about each other and how we all have a role. It brought support into the school and the community that wasn't there before, and expertise and people, folks who were enthusiastic about the project. It was a catalyst through which other good things happened in the community, as a direct result.

The Spirit of Extension

Finally, Charlie asked me to speak about the "spirit" of extension, and your role as Master Gardeners in giving it life and carrying it forward.

So what is the spirit of extension?

I want to let Rick Burstell answer this question. Rick was a diesel mechanic for twenty years until he caught the extension spirit and got a job in Green County coordinating the Master Gardener program. A student in one of my classes interviewed him about his work. In his interview, Rick said this:

We just had our big staff meeting the other day. It was all about our extension mission and all the things that Cornell Cooperative Extension is going to be involved in here in Greene County. It was so impressive to me; it was all positive stuff.

When I was involved with private industry, we always had a graph on the wall with the numbers, and that was what it was all about. The only thing that mattered was the numbers. If the numbers were going up, everything was fine. It didn't matter if everybody in the place was suffering or not; it was all about the numbers.

Here, we want to improve this community. We want to make the people in this community more informed. We want to help them to make the right decisions in their life. We want to teach them to have a healthier attitude, to eat healthier, to be healthier towards their neighbors, and to embrace and protect the beautiful natural environment that they have around them.

In between the television and the movies, we get taken in by all these horrible images and horrible versions of reality. Most of our realities are made up of all these phony situations; made up by Hollywood. We have so much of that in our consciousness.

We need to have some other good information in there too, that people cooperate with each other and do good things, and where people are more concerned about helping their community than they are about building their bank account. Relationships with each other in the community are more important than having a huge amount of money and buying a huge house and big cars.

When I first read what Rick said, I was immediately reminded of something Liberty Hyde Bailey, the founding leader of Cornell's extension work in New York State, wrote almost a hundred years ago when the extension idea was new. Bailey wrote:

The ultimate welfare of the community does not depend on the balance-sheets of a few industries, but on the character of the people, the moral issues, the nature of home life, the community pride, the public spirit, the readiness of responses to calls for aid, the opportunities of education and recreation and entertainment and cooperative activity as well as of increased daily work and better wages.¹

The spirit of extension is really nothing more—and nothing less—than the human spirit, dedicated and directed to the pursuit of the “ultimate welfare of the community.” We see this spirit in Rick Burstell's comments. We see it in the work and wisdom of Renee Schloupt, Sally Cunningham, and Marcia Eames-Sheavly. And I know we would see it in each of you if you had the chance to come up here and tell us who you are and why you're here.

Beyond becoming knowledgeable about horticulture and gardening, beyond sharing your knowledge and expertise with the citizens of this state, your role is to keep the spirit alive that is dedicated to the ultimate welfare of people, of communities, of the earth. Your role is to awaken inspiration and hope, to teach civic and environmental responsibility, and, not least, to spread an infectious joy and love and reverence for the beauty and the simple but profoundly important pleasures to be found in people's own backyards and neighborhoods.

I have not forgotten what is perhaps the toughest question I posed when I began my remarks: that is, why should educational organizations like Cornell University and Cornell Cooperative Extension, organizations that are funded in large part with people's hard-earned tax dollars, be involved in gardening? I want to let Liberty Hyde Bailey answer this question. In his delightful book, *The Garden Lover*, published in 1928, Bailey wrote:

¹ Liberty Hyde Bailey, *Universal Service* (Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing Co., 1918), pp. 151-152.

Any enterprise closely associated with homes and that hopefully employs the leisure of multitudes of people is worthy of investigations and researches conducted at public expense. It is a sad attitude of legislators and others that predicates the need of such investigations on the probable money earnings of the enterprises, as if there were no other measure of human life.²

Thank goodness there are, indeed, other measures of human life. Without diminishing the importance of the money earnings of the various enterprises of the world—including, of course, gardening and horticulture—a special part of your work is to teach these other measures, not by preaching about them, but by embodying them in who you are and what you do.

So, you are more than gardeners and more than fact tellers. You are educators. And I for one want to say, for everything you do as volunteers, thanks.

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² Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Garden Lover* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 19.