

An Online Resource Site for Extension Master Gardener Coordinators

Abstract

Developing an online resource site for Extension master gardener (EMG) coordinators is an ongoing project for Extension collaborators. Begun in 2014, the website includes peer-reviewed resources focused on best practices in volunteer management and program administration. The website is organized according to nine resource categories (e.g., program planning, engaging and teaching adults) and three resource types (i.e., readings, PowerPoint files, templates). In this article, we identify criteria used by peer reviewers and describe the processes for identifying potential resources, building site content, and making the website more accessible.

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At the 2012 National Extension Master Gardener (EMG) Coordinators' Conference, attendees voiced strong support for the formation of a task force that would work on issues related to EMG volunteer management and program administration. This should not be surprising, as several studies have documented a need for resources, trainings, or professional development opportunities related to Extension volunteer management (Casteel, 2012; Seevers, Baca, & Van Leeuwen, 2005; Sherfey, Hiller, Macduff, & Mack, 2000). In particular, online or distance learning formats were identified as especially popular options for supporting work in Extension volunteer management (Casteel, 2012; Seevers et al., 2005; Sherfey et al., 2000).

In a previous article, we reported on the first outcome of this task force: the development and adoption of a mission statement and set of program standards for EMG programs in the United States (Langellotto, Moen, Straub, & Dorn, 2015). Here we report on our approach and on our progress in developing an online resource site for EMG coordinators.

Identifying Website Categories and Resource Types

In addition to the four topics identified as "high priority" at the 2012 conference (i.e., recruitment, retention, conflict management, and evaluation), task force members discussed including

information on the array of volunteer management topics most likely to be of use to EMG coordinators. We reviewed volunteer management websites and resources and identified nine resource categories:

- program planning;
- engaging and teaching adults;
- volunteer recruitment, selection, and placement;
- development and retention of volunteer leaders;
- conflict management;
- program evaluation;
- fostering diversity;
- working with youth; and
- social media resources.

Task force members did a preliminary sweep of the existing resources and found that they usually fell into one of three categories or resource types—readings, PowerPoint files, or templates:

- Readings are peer-reviewed or other articles that provide information on best practices in volunteer management.
- PowerPoint files are narrated or scripted slide-based files that provide information on best practices in volunteer management or that can be used to train EMG volunteers on policies, procedures, or protocols associated with EMG programs.
- Templates are documents that can be used (with modifications to reflect specific programs) to evaluate EMG programs, recognize volunteers, or otherwise assist an EMG coordinator in performing a volunteer management or program task.

We organized the website according to resource categories (e.g. conflict management, program evaluation) as well as resource type (i.e., readings, PowerPoint files, templates).

Recruiting Reviewers and Defining Resource Criteria

In 2014, a call for resources went out to EMG coordinators via email and during monthly EMG online discussions. More than 40 resources were nominated. At the same time, we asked for volunteers who would be willing to review resources. A total of 30 EMG coordinators from 22 states volunteered as peer reviewers. Of these, 27 ultimately served as reviewers, with at least three EMG coordinators assigned to each nominated resource.

Reviewers were asked to consider several criteria when reviewing resources. Some criteria centered on the significant qualities of being useful, transferable, and research based; other criteria related to additional qualities, such as uniqueness and adherence to EMG standards:

- *Usefulness*. The material should be nationally applicable or, if regionally applicable, should have the potential to be adapted for nationwide use.
- *Transferability*. The material should be in-depth enough that someone using the resource can understand how to apply it to his or her own master gardener program.
- *Basis in research*. The material should be research based or recognized as a best practice among volunteer managers.
- Necessary permissions or photo releases must have been obtained for videos or photos.
- Copyright permissions must have been secured for images or for the use of other copyrighted material.
- The material must be unique, above and beyond what has already been posted.
- The material must adhere to the EMG standards and mission.

Reviewers' comments and scores (out of 100) for usefulness, transferability, and basis in research were noted and archived. As a general rule, only resources with a mean score of 75 or higher are included on the website.

Resources with a mean score of 90 or above across the three categories of usefulness, transferability, and basis in research were identified as stellar resources and highlighted with a purple icon (Figure 1). When reviewers noted that a resource would be especially useful for new EMG coordinators, the resource was identified with a green icon (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Icons Used to Identify Stellar Resources and Resources Useful for New EMG Coordinators



Building the Website

A draft website was built on eXtension's Create page. However, several drawbacks were noted about the eXtension Create page. The page cannot be found via a standard Google search, and it cannot be accessed by those without an eXtension ID. In fact, a survey of 130 coordinators 1 year after the

draft website was launched revealed the following information:

- Fifty-five percent did not know the website existed.
- Sixty-one percent had never used the website.
- People did not use the website because they did not know it existed (72%) or could not find it (13%). Only 5% said they did not use the website because the resources were not useful to them.
- Sixty percent did not know that the resources were peer reviewed, but 95% felt that having peer-reviewed resources increased the usefulness of the website.

On the basis of this feedback, we moved the website content to a publically accessible Google Site: Resources for Extension Master Gardener Coordinators (https://sites.google.com/a/extension.org/emg_coordinators/home). To date, we have 27 resources posted across nine subject areas. Of these, nine have been identified as stellar resources.

Next Steps

We will continue to solicit resource nominations and build the website content. We will recruit colleagues for the resource team (which currently consists of the two authors of this article). Team members will help manage the website and the peer review process. We also plan to initiate a formal process of appreciation and recognition. Letters of commendation and certificates of recognition will be sent to all authors whose resources are posted on the website, with special recognition going to those who created resources recognized as stellar by their peers. Finally, we will assess the utility of the website to EMG coordinators in an effort to document impact and to make improvements that will better serve EMG coordinators.

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