

Every growing season the UVM Extension Master Gardener (EMG) Program is busy answering statewide gardening and landscape questions from the gardening public. Before COVID-19, about 15 to 20 trained EMG Helpline volunteers came to UVM’s campus-based Plant Diagnostic Clinic and alternated shifts to answer approximately 1,000 emails and phone calls from March to November each year. As a result of COVID-19, the EMG Helpline volunteers were not permitted to be on campus during the 2020 and 2021 growing seasons. However, more Vermonters started gardening during this period and the program saw a drastic increase in gardening inquiries as well as pest and disease questions. To address the volume of questions remotely, the EMG program pivoted to an on-line platform, “ASK EXTENSION”. ASK EXTENSION is a national initiative of the US Cooperative Extension System that provides one-to-one expert answers from Cooperative Extension and University staff and volunteers from across the country. This platform enabled Vermont gardeners to post questions and photos and receive science-based answers from trained EMG volunteers. EMG Helpline volunteers answered the questions remotely on a rotating basis throughout the growing season and had the option to “opt out” during vacation times. The ASK EXTENSION program was a success-both from the standpoint of the gardener and the Master Gardener volunteers. In fact, the volunteers answered 1,057 questions as of mid-November, a record amount for the program! This past season’s dedicated volunteers included Genica Breitenbeck, Juanita Burch-Clay, Kathy Dodge, Karl Doerner, Cindy Heath, Rob Kurth, Judy Mirro, Laura Morse, Virginia Munkelwitz, Jane Murphy, Jeff Nummelin, Enrique Peredo, Pat Sabalis, Margery Salmon, Gina Scafa, Jessie Schilling, Robilee Smith, and Dan Steinbauer. Lisa Chouinard and I also answered email questions in addition to assisting and keeping all the volunteers on track throughout the season. We plan to continue to use the ASK EXTENSION platform even if volunteers are back in the lab (fingers crossed!) for the 2022 season to offer greater accessibility to our EMG resources. Lisa will be sending out an email to the listserv in January asking for more volunteers to join the Helpline Ask Extension platform and to submit an application if they are interested. Deb Heleba, the new UVM Extension Master Gardener Coordinator, compiled these impressive stats for the Helpline comparing the last four years.

### UVM Extension Master Gardener Helpline Stats

