Betty Seims is not one to plant squash. It takes up too much space and chokes out the other vegetables. But Jeanette Fryhling, with whom Seims manages two plots in the city’s community garden, has an idea. “There’s a young man who has a plot in the garden. He plants a traditional Native American Three Sisters garden: corn, then beans, which grow up the corn, and squash surrounding.”

Such knowledge sharing among generations is common at the Cambridge community garden, established in 2009 as a joint venture between Master Gardeners, the Isanti County Environmental Coalition and the City of Cambridge. “It was originally a vacant piece of land, owned by the city,” says John Nordin, Master Gardener volunteer and community garden cofounder. “Three years later, with 60 plots and more than 100 participants, it feels like a carnival. It’s a happy place.”

Cambridge Mayor Marlys Palmer agrees. “I refer to it as a ‘victory garden’ because it has been such a victory—for the people who work so hard there and for the entire community,” she says. “It brings together young and old.”

The Cambridge community garden is just one example of Master Gardeners giving back in their communities. In its 35th year, the Master Gardener program continues to thrive, attracting new members each year and proving essential.
to the state, the University and the public. It has 2,269 active members whose dedication is apparent in having passed an extensive certification process: an interview, 48 hours of classroom training, and a minimum of 50 hours of volunteering.

From there, the real work begins. “Communities drive our agenda,” says Julie Weisenhorn, state director of Extension’s Master Gardener program. “Whatever education or information communities request, we fulfill from manning hotlines and answering online questions to running diagnostic clinics and information fairs, teaching classes, and helping establish community gardens.”

Additionally, they work with University of Minnesota scientists and educators, tending research plots, collecting data, and interpreting results for the public. “That’s a core value of our program,” says Weisenhorn, “to connect the citizens of Minnesota with University information and show them how to apply it in their daily lives.”

It’s no small action. This can mean great advancements for the state’s critical environmental needs, such as protecting natural habitat, identifying and eliminating invasive species, and avoiding chemical run-off and water waste.

At the Cambridge community garden, Master Gardeners share such information alongside members’ tips on a bulletin board, helping Seims and Fryhling grow the fresh vegetables they provide the senior activity center each week. Extra produce often fills a bin close to the road for community members to help themselves.

“The garden is wonderful for seniors,” says Seims. “I love the feeling that I’m doing something worthwhile for our community.”

To find out more about Extension’s Master Gardener program, visit extension.umn.edu/master-gardener

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**BRINGING RESEARCH TO BLOOM**

Without Master Gardeners, Extension educator Kathy Zuzek would have to clone herself many times over. Zuzek researches the hardiness of roses with test sites throughout the state. She works closely with Master Gardener volunteers throughout Minnesota who maintain plots and evaluate results, enabling Zuzek to test the plants in the state’s various climates and conditions.

“Using my key, they evaluate the plants on a three- to four-week repeat cycle throughout the growing season for several years,” she says.

Extension horticulturist Vince Fritz’s research also benefited from Master Gardeners, who formed a sensory panel to determine at what level of bitterness a vegetable becomes unpalatable. The more bitter the vegetable, the higher level of phytonutrients it contains, which is better for health—if one can get it down.

“Vegetables that have a high phytonutrient concentration are thought to have preventative benefits against various forms of cancer,” says Fritz, who works to find agricultural connections to disease prevention.

Fritz relies heavily on Master Gardener volunteers and not just for the bitter tasks. They also aid him in the field, collecting data and tending crops.

“We trust the training and knowledge base of our Master Gardeners,” says Zuzek. “They are as passionate about the field as any of us who teach or do research.”

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**GREENER GARDENING PRACTICES**

It’s fairly easy to be green, say Anoka County citizens. A 2011 survey of those who participated in Anoka County Master Gardener program offerings found that

- 28 percent used fewer pesticides
- 32 percent reduced their watering
- 32 percent planted more vegetables after taking the classes.

Simple steps based on University research had an enormous effect, from selecting the right plant for the site (one that won’t require excessive chemicals to thrive) to watering at the right time of day for maximum hydration.

“We provide an environmental stewardship message in most everything we do,” says Lynne Hagen, Anoka County Master Gardener program coordinator. In Anoka County: Message received.

For more information about Master Gardener offerings in your area, visit extension.umn.edu/garden/events

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**For answers to your gardening questions using the U’s research-based information, visit extension.umn.edu/garden/ask**