



Whether you're a novice or a green thumb, helpful expertise is readily available through a variety of resources.

There's always something more to learn about gardening. And if you don't want to learn everything by trial and error in your own garden plot, you can take advantage of all sorts of resources right in your own backyard, so to speak. The western suburbs are brimming with gardening expertise, much of which is free for the asking and suitable for the home gardener and the budding professional.

EDUCATING YOURSELF

Whether you want a formal education in horticulture or a just-for-fun class about gardening, area community colleges offer a wide variety of courses in landscape design and the cultivation of gardens, as does the granddaddy of horticultural education, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

U of I's Extension services, which were originally designed to help farmers and their families, have expanded over the years to offer all sorts of help for home gardeners via county offices, where experts understand

that particular area and its growing season and habits. Richard Hentschel, extension specialist at Extension services, says their mission is to "share an unbiased source of information for homeowners."

One of the ways U of I's Extension services share expertise is through its Master Gardener program. Volunteers apply to go through an 11-week study program and then help other gardeners in a variety of ways throughout the year, such as answering the help lines at county Extension offices and assisting with community gardening projects.

You can also find a wealth of information online at web.extension.illinois.edu. More than 350 websites are linked to Extension services, with specialized information on such subjects as landscape design, vegetable gardening, food safety and pest control,

as well as gardening activities for children and 4-H for youth.

Barbara Bates of U of I's Kane County Extension office, says that its speakers' bureau is available to any group to provide gardening presentations on a range of subjects. "Vegetable gardening is very hot this year," she observes, with presentations on everything from how to start a vegetable garden to how to preserve the food you grow.

For those considering a career in horticulture, area community colleges, including College of DuPage, Joliet Junior College and Triton College, offer associate's degrees and certificate programs in horticultural specialties such as landscape design and construction and nursery and garden center management.

At College of DuPage, landscape design is the most popular program, according to Horticulture Professor Julia Fitzpatrick-Cooper. She observes that many of their students already have college degrees in other subjects, but return to school to pursue a new career

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County's heritage gardens at Mayslake Peabody Estate in Oak Brook offer gardeners inspiration (below left), while greenhouse plant sales at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn (below right) let visitors select from a wide variety of plants and flowers for their own gardens.



Photo courtesy of Forest Preserve District of DuPage County



Photo courtesy of College of DuPage



Photo by Mary Lemak of Batavia, courtesy of Cantigny.

Cantigny's Idea Garden in Wheaton offers self-led and docent-led tours to visitors. A variety of gardening classes and seminars are also offered.



Photo by Philip Chimino of Orland Park, courtesy of Cantigny.

or to pick up new skills for personal reasons. In keeping with the trend for all things green, COD will begin a new certificate program on sustainable landscaping this fall.

Horticulture and gardening classes also are available at Morton Arboretum, which offers a home landscape gardening certificate program, and at the Chicago Botanic Garden, which offers certificate and professional programs, as well as graduate education affiliated with Northwestern University and the University of Illinois.

For those less inclined to an intensive education on the subject, many colleges offer continuing education classes in gardening, and shorter gardening seminars are available at Cantigny, Morton Arboretum and the Chicago Botanic Garden, as well as a host of garden centers, park districts, forest preserves, libraries, garden clubs and other community organizations.

LEARNING BY DOING

Of course, the best way to learn how to garden is by getting your hands dirty. Liz Omura, horticulture educator and

volunteer coordinator at Cantigny, recommends volunteering as a great way to pick up professional-level skills. "Our horticulture volunteers learn a lot," she observes. They also benefit from receiving "leftovers" from the garden, such as plant plugs to take home.

"Joining a garden club is fabulous," notes Omura, adding, "There are clubs that 'do' and clubs that 'meet.'" She suggests getting involved with a club of doers, who are active in the community. "There's a wealth of information from older members who know what works," and inspiration from younger members as well, she says.

To find out more about garden clubs in your area, contact the Garden Clubs of Illinois at 630 617-9269. They will collect information on your interests and put you in touch with one or more clubs in your area to explore. Stephanie Greene, president of the Garden Clubs of Illinois, says there are close to 50 garden clubs throughout the western suburbs. Each club focuses on one

or more of four general subjects: landscape design, horticulture, flower design and conservation. Most clubs meet monthly and many work on projects to beautify their communities, as well as hold garden walks, plant sales, house tours and seminars.

WANDERING GARDEN PATHS

An easy way to start developing an eye for good garden design is to visit both public and private gardens. There's a lot to learn by seeing established gardens and picking up ideas from professionally designed spaces.

Cantigny is redesigning its Idea Garden this year, and there's always something new in bloom throughout the growing season in gardens of various styles. You can take a tour of the Cantigny gardens on your own or join a docent-led tour, photo walk or bike tour. Omura says that they will again be offering "Tips and Tastes in the Garden," which combines tips for growing edibles with food demonstrations by chefs and culinary students from Elgin Community College. Check out their calendar at www.cantigny.org for event and tour details.

Area forest preserves and park districts maintain an array of formal and informal gardens to explore, and also hold garden-related workshops, as well as invite volunteers to work in their gardens under professional supervision.

The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County has a variety of cultivated and prairie gardens open to the public, including the heritage gardens at Mayslake Peabody Estate and Kline Creek Farm. Mayslake Estate features a formal garden with plants that were available before 1920, while Kline Creek Farm has a kitchen garden and a dooryard flower garden circa 1890s.

According to Pat Walton, heritage interpreter at Kline Creek Farm, visitors can see how the old-fashioned gardens grow, ask questions about good gardening



Photo courtesy of Ball Horticultural Company

Rarely open for public viewing, West Chicago's Gardens at Ball Horticultural Company will throw open its doors for tours on Sunday, August 1 as part of the Garden Conservancy's annual Open Days program.

practices and learn which heirloom varieties work best in our climate. To extend the growing season, the farm uses hot beds and cold frames to protect vegetables in the early spring and late fall, as the early residents of Kline Creek Farm would have done.

At Mayslake, Heritage Interpreter Janneke Fowers says that volunteer gardeners maintain the gardens near the home and are often on hand to answer gardening questions from visitors. The gardens are open from sunrise to sunset. Mayslake also hosts a "Glorious Gardens" lecture series during the spring and summer. Check out all the events and garden venues at www.dupageforest.com.

And be sure to watch for garden events and educational offerings at municipal park districts, too. For example, the Forest Preserve District of Kane County, in conjunction with the St. Charles, Geneva and Fox Valley park districts, offers a Certified Naturalist program related to conservation.

For flower lovers, there's probably

no better opportunity to explore great private gardens than through the Open Days program of the national Garden Conservancy. This year, the Gardens at Ball Horticultural Company in West Chicago, which are rarely open to the public, will be shown on Sunday, August 1, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., through the Garden Conservancy's Open Days program.

"There will be flowers everywhere," says Susan Schmitz, trails and education manager for Ball. "Here, more than anywhere else, there will be such a concentration of color." That's because Ball is one of the biggest growers of annuals in the nation. Schmitz promises more gardens to be open this year, more containers, a trend garden, and "exciting new varieties never shown before."

Admission to any Open Days garden is \$5 in cash, and no advance tickets are needed. For more information on Open Days, including other Illinois locations for Open Days in 2010, visit www.gardenconservancy.org/opendays.

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS

Anyone who has gardened for any length of time knows that not everything comes up roses. There are always pests and other challenges of nature with which to contend.

If you need a diagnosis of your particular problem, your county Extension office can help you determine what pest or disease or other problem is plaguing your plants. You can call the help line, bring in a sample or send digital photos. If the county office is not able to identify the problem, they will send your sample on to the University of Illinois campus for scientific analysis.

The Morton Arboretum also has a plant clinic open on weekdays, as well as lots of helpful information on plant health at www.mortonarb.org.

One of the biggest problems gardeners encounter is putting the wrong plant in the wrong place. Morton experts and county Extension office staff can help you make the right plant selection for your particular site, whether shady or sunny, dry or soggy. You'll also find plenty of expertise at the best garden centers. Then, too, you can visit the special plant sales going on in May, sponsored by the likes of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, College of DuPage, Chicago Botanic Garden, Naperville Master Gardeners and many others – as well as farmers' markets, which are especially good for native plants.

If your own plot of land is too small for planting, consider renting a community garden plot, offered by many park districts and municipalities. Chances are you'll have to plan ahead for next year, though. The garden plots in many suburbs are already sold out for the season.

If no community garden plots are available or you're not sure that you can handle your own garden, think small. Garden experts say that container gardens are more popular than ever, and you can even get expert help on such a small scale. All you have to do is ask. ■