



PRESSED FOR THYME

Updates & Insights for Master Gardener Volunteers



Meet your State Master Gardener Volunteer Team!

Program Director: Pam Bennett Professor, Horticulture Educator

I LOVE MY JOB! I am so fortunate to work with Master Gardener Volunteers around the state and have been doing so since 1993. I started as a Program Assistant with OSU Extension in 1993, and the first task assigned to me was to start an MGV program in Clark County. I did that in 1993, and then in 1994 started the Greene County MGV program (Clark and Greene County shared my time for a year). I then moved to Horticulture Educator in Clark County full-time and have been there since.

In 2005, we lost funding for our MGV State Program Director, Marianne Riofrio. After she left, the MGV Advisory Committee kept things going until Extension Administration appointed me to become the 0.5FTE State Program Director. The other half of my time is spent in Clark County. I love having a half-time appointment as it keeps me grounded with the reality of the day-to-day life

of managing MGVs. The state position has allowed me to meet so many more wonderful volunteers and expand my horizons.

After graduating high school, I went to Miami University to become a physical education teacher. Coming home for the summer after my freshman year, my mom had gotten me a job in a local garden center. Thanks mom, I had planned on enjoying the brand new pool you and dad put in after I left!

It turns out it was the best summer and changed my career path. I transferred to OSU and earned a degree in landscape horticulture, in 1981. I also have an MS in Agriculture Education (which is now the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership). In 2028, I will have 50 years of horticulture experience. Wow, am I old! But as I said, I LOVE MY JOB!

Above: Student Kass Groner, Pam Bennett, student Grace Whitmore, Jen Andon

I live in Springfield, and I am super proud of my adult children. One is the first female police chief in Springfield, one is a nurse, and one works for Woolpert out of Beavercreek. I also have five grandchildren who are the love and center of my life (along with my children and husband – if you know you know). My husband, Rick, is retired, and I am looking forward to retirement soon.

Gardening is not only my job but my hobby. I work outside almost every nice day. I also quilt, embroider, bake, read, travel, play pickleball, and play other sports as my body allows me to, and go to ballgames to see the grands play.

I am always humbled by the great work that MGVs are doing around the state. I appreciate you all and your contributions to OSU Extension.





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Program Manager: Jen Andon

Hi! I'm Jennifer Andon — a lifelong Buckeye in every sense of the word. I've been with The Ohio State University for 20 years, and the joke in my family is that I practically started life on campus... because I did! I was born right at the OSU Medical Center, so my connection to Ohio State began on day one.

My love of insects, plants, and teaching blossomed early and carried me through my bachelor's degree (2003) and master's degree (2008) in entomology at Ohio State. Somewhere between insect pinning, turf pest diagnostics, and telling everyone who would listen just how cool insects really are, I realized I had found my career path.

For the past five years, I've had the absolute joy of serving as the Program Manager for the OSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program. I truly adore working with our incredible, dedicated volunteers who bring so much energy, curiosity,



and heart to their communities. Helping support their work in horticulture education and service is one of the most fulfilling parts of my career. Honestly, I think I've found my forever job.

Before joining the MGV team, I worked with the Pesticide Safety Education Program, collaborating with county educators to train and certify farmers in the safe and effective use of pesticides. Prior to that, I spent 13 wonderful years as a research technician in turfgrass entomology with Dr. Dave Shetlar, gaining hands on experience in diagnostics, research, outreach... and collecting more field stories than any one person probably needs.

I grew up in Westerville and now live in Worthington with my husband and our four very active kids — meaning my life is a whirlwind of gardening, sports schedules, school events, and family adventures. When I'm not working, you'll likely find me in the garden, out on a walk, traveling, or spending time with friends and family.



And truthfully, one of the BEST parts of my job is the people I get to work with. I am surrounded by such amazing colleagues. Pam Bennett has been a tremendous mentor and friend — steady, supportive, and inspiring. Our county coordinators and educators are equally incredible; they consistently pour themselves into their programs with creativity, dedication, and passion.

I've also been blessed with the most wonderful student assistants — fun, energetic, efficient, and hardworking. They brighten our office every single day and make our work smoother and more enjoyable.

At the end of the day, I feel incredibly lucky. I love what I do, I love the people I get to do it with, and I'm genuinely grateful to have a job that fills me with purpose, joy, and a whole lot of gratitude.





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Student Assistant: Kass Groner

Hi everyone! My name is Kass, and I'm originally from Erie, PA. I grew up spending lots of time on my grandparents' farm, which gave me a life-long love of both animals and plants. As a kid, I was a huge book nerd, often reading my way through multiple books a week. I also loved to paint, draw, and write; in third grade, I told everyone my dream was to be a famous author! I rode horses starting from age five, which turned into a part-time job guiding trail rides at age 16.

After I graduated high school in 2018, I began working with horses as well as small livestock full-time at a farm geared towards educating both children and adults on the ethics of sustainable agriculture. We welcomed guests to the farm, and after the early days of the COVID pandemic in 2020, we even began taking animals on the road! I had the privilege of letting baby goats bounce around a middle school basketball court while I talked about dairy farming practices to a group of thirteen-year-olds. It was an experience I'll hold onto forever!

I loved that job, but it could be draining; plants are certainly easier to take care of than animals! In late 2021 I moved to Columbus, OH and started working at an urban vegetable farm with a program for educating home-schooled kids. I worked at that farm for several years before deciding I was in a good financial position to start going to college! In 2024 I enrolled at the Ohio State University, where I'm now a double-major in Sustainable Plant Systems and Comparative Studies. As you probably know, I also work as a Student Assistant for OSUE Master Gardener Volunteer

program! I love being in school, and I'm hoping to move on to earning a master's degree after completing undergrad. Apart from attending college and working with Jen, Grace, and Pam, I also spend my time playing with my houseplants, painting with watercolors, and hiking with my partner.

Student Assistant: Grace Whitmore

Hi I'm Grace Whitmore! I am a current senior studying Entomology at The Ohio State University and I graduate in May! Starting in the fall I will be attending graduate school continuing my education with a focus on Integrated Pest Management and insect/plant pathology. I have been working for the Master Gardener Volunteer program as a Student Assistant since October of 2024. Through this work experience I have strengthened my skills with combining analytics, programming, and creative communication, all to vitalize volunteer and outreach engagement. This experience has provided me with a unique perspective on how education and community can incite purposeful impact.

More personally, I am a first generation college student from Springfield, Ohio and I received my Associate of Science while in high school, so I'll be ending my undergraduate education at twenty! I love to travel and have had the opportunity to visit thirteen countries, including my three month research internship in Trondheim, Norway and my most recent trip to Otavalo, Ecuador through the Master Gardener Volunteers program.



I love being involved within my community and am the current President of Alpha Zeta, an agricultural fraternal leadership organization. Additionally, I serve as peer mentor and student ambassador through the College of Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Science, allowing me to shape the futures of prospective and incoming first-year students. I like to volunteer any extra time at the OSU insectary and Bugmobile where I have the privilege of delivering entomology-based programming across Ohio.

Also I recently earned my American Degree through the National FFA Organization! I have always had a deep love and passion for agriculture and science. Aside from work, academics, and community involvement, I enjoy hiking, roller skating, watching odd sci-fi movies, and spending time with my family and friends. You can always find me tucked away in the corner of a cafe with my friends playing DnD, studying, or reading horror novels.

