

Racial Justice + Master Gardeners: Biodiversity in the garden means the people too

By Gail Langellotto and LeAnn Locher

We are in the middle of a major shift and many changes in our country. For some, it's incredibly painful. For some, it's incredibly needed. But what we know for sure: what's worked in the past – old systems, limitations, and hierarchies won't work in the future. This is the same for Oregon's Extension Master Gardener Program.

Right now, we have a great opportunity to look at who we are and why we exist. In this shifting landscape, if we hold tight to what once was we risk losing relevance and credibility with our communities. But we can flex. We can dig deep. We can shine a light on [our core values](#) and realign ourselves to meeting the needs of our communities. We need to stand for racial justice in all corners of our lives, including gardening. We know this work. [Decades of ecological research](#) tell us that gardens are stronger with more biodiversity.

We're going to ask a lot of questions—and do a lot of listening. Who deeply needs our services that we're not reaching? Where can we make a bigger impact on growing future gardeners in Oregon? Who are the faces among us that are missing and who do we need to make sure we're standing shoulder to shoulder with as we dig into this great work?

The fact is, [our program is predominantly white, older, and female](#). But gardening, itself, is such a multi-faceted activity that affords opportunities for participation from many angles. Gardening and garden plants provide food, beauty, and shade. Gardens can engage bird watchers, insect enthusiasts and other wildlife caretakers. Perhaps you love gardening because you are drawn to the sweet smell of healthy soil or the magic that occurs during composting. Gardening offers an opportunity to grow, and touch, and smell, and taste the foods that were part of our youth, but that can be hard to find in the stores: heirloom varieties or cultural favorites. A garden can be the common ground that brings diverse perspectives, experiences, hopes, and desires together in one place.

There are many ways and many reasons for people to engage with gardening. If our goal is to reach all budding Oregon gardeners, are we only in conversation with each other? What is the need and what resources do we have to give and share? Who's not in our garden and at our tables?

Why does this matter?

As [Oregon State University President Ed Ray recently wrote](#):

“As a university community, we must join together to ensure that all members of the OSU community — students, faculty, staff and visitors — not only feel welcomed and safe, but experience our community as a place to thrive. Each and every member of our community must know they are valued, that they belong here, and that we celebrate the rich diversity that they bring to Oregon State University. We should not tolerate anything less. “

Working for racial justice and equity is not only part of OSU's core values. For Gail, it's also personal.

From Gail:

As a mixed-race person (Filipino and White), I developed the ability to blend in with the dominant culture at an early age, and it has benefited me throughout my career. This is a form of privilege that black and brown people do not have.

Even so, I was once pulled over for making a wide left turn. It was summer, and I was tan after months of working in New Jersey salt marshes for my M.S. thesis. On a break, I was helping a friend move to Arizona, driving a moving truck with trailer hitched to the back. I was not used to driving something so big and I made a wide turn. I was pulled over by the police, told my license was suspended (it was not), handcuffed and sat on hot asphalt, while the officer (and backup) went through the moving truck. It was painfully hot and humiliating, and thinking about that incident, today, makes me tear up. Still, I have only experienced something like this, once in my entire life. I am able to shed my tan. It is a form of privilege that racial profiling is not part of my daily life.

Everyone belongs here as Master Gardeners: it's imperative we acknowledge and hold space for fellow gardeners of color.

What can we do now? Be open even if it feels scary. Get comfortable with discomfort. Talk about issues in your neighborhood, community, and Master Gardener meetings. Listen to the hard conversations. And read! We're reading a lot. Here are some suggestions:

- [The Color of Food: stories of race, resilience, and farming](#). Natasha Bowens.
- [Rooted in the Earth: reclaiming the African American environmental heritage](#). Dianne D. Glave.
- [The Home Place: memoirs of a colored man's love affair with nature](#). J. Drew Lanham
- [Me and White Supremacy: combat racism, change the world, and become a good ancestor](#). Layla F. Saad (Unlimited availability through Multnomah County Library and linked library systems)
- [My Garden \(Book\)](#). Jamaica Kincaid.

Let us know what you're reading and what podcasts you're listening to. What questions are you asking? What have you heard that resonates with and challenges you?

I know that some Master Gardener groups and individual Master Gardener volunteers have worked hard to fulfill our mission of serving all Oregonians. You have shared your successes, and we have learned from them. You have shared your disappointments when the best of plans and intentions did not work out as you had hoped. Even if you carry concern that a focus on racial justice and equity has not worked, or will not work within our program ~ this is not the time to stop. This is exactly the time we need to step up our

game, listen, learn, and grow our work to be more equitable and inclusive of our many communities, particularly our communities of color. We look forward to growing together, and to working towards racial justice and equity in the Master Gardener Program.

Gail Langellotto is a Professor of Horticulture and an Urban and Community Horticulture Extension Specialist with Oregon State University.

LeAnn Locher is the Outreach Program Coordinator for Oregon State University's Extension Master Gardener Program.