

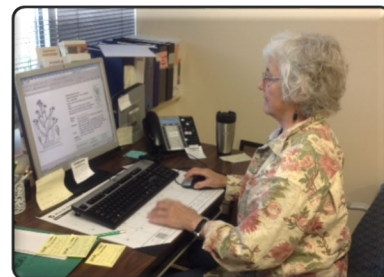


Horticulture Helpline

Responding to Dane County Residents' Landscape and Gardening Questions

Situation: Dane County residents frequently have lawn, landscape and gardening questions that they need help with to increase the success of food production, increase the value and safety of home landscapes, maintain houseplants, and create spaces that support pollinators. Reliable information is needed about a wide spectrum of questions ranging from lawn care to tree selection, pruning and safety concerns, ornamental and native perennial and annual plant care and selection, insect and disease identification, houseplants, vegetable plants, composting, weed and invasive species Identification and management, and more.

Response: UW Extension is a recognized leader in providing unbiased, research-based, locally relevant, and environmentally sound information so the public relies on Extension to provide correct information. Gardening questions come to Extension offices via phone, email, or in-person. Dane County Extension offers a Horticulture Helpline service where the public can send questions via email or phone. While Lisa Johnson, Horticulture Educator answers many questions herself, the Helpline, staffed by trained volunteers is critical to handling the many questions arriving in the office. The number of questions has increased in the past few years with the installment of UW Extension's statewide online "Ask Your Gardening Question" form (<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/ask-a-gardening-question/>), which has brought the gardening question service to the attention of more residents.



Dane County volunteers comprise one of the largest county-based volunteer plant health advisor programs in the state. The Horticulture Educator, holds a training each fall for new volunteers and 1 to 2 updates during the growing season for the volunteers to continue to upgrade their knowledge and learn about any newly arrived insect pests and diseases.

UW-Madison Division of Extension's Horticulture Program provides research and evidence-based horticulture education, resources, and decision-making tools to home gardeners and commercial horticulture practitioners.

Results: Dane County volunteers and the Horticulture Educator, responded to over 529 questions via email, phone and walk-ins in 2023. Statewide, the total number of garden questions was 2,644 so Dane covered more than 20% of all inquiries. Persons who contacted the Helpline often received answers to more than one query. Responses from the Helpline included diagnoses of insect and disease issues, advice on plant varieties, weed and invasive plant management issues, links and attached fact sheets, referrals to the Horticulture Educator, UW plant, soil or entomology labs, or other agencies.

All users of the service are sent a feedback survey. Replies were received from 126 users in 2023. 88% rated the service as very good or good. And 61% said they would change or adopt new gardening practices as a result of the information they received.

Results included several individuals sharing they refrained from pruning pin oaks until after October 31, prioritizing the preservation of large oak trees. Appropriate pruning and correct tree and shrub care were common themes, with one client choosing to wait until spring to plant a rose bush. Others addressed specific issues such as invasive plants, with actions ranging from digging up Creeping Bellflower to removing identified invasives from native plantings. Overall, the feedback reflects a proactive and informed approach to gardening based on the provided advice.

Most common topics:

- 36% Plant disease
- 24% plant culture
- 18% plant ID
- 18% garden planning
- 15% other
- 13% insects

Feedback from a few users of the Horticulture Helpline:

- "The Helpline volunteer was efficient, caring, and knowledgeable."*
- "The Helpline provided organic and non-toxic options not available other places."*
- "Thanks so much for your detailed email. The plant guide doc is also helpful."*
- "Thank you for your time, resources and explanation."*



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