

Hardin County Extension News Release

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For Immediate Release – October 16, 2023

Thomas Named Ohio Outstanding Master Gardener

Hardin County – Kim Thomas was one of ten individuals out of approximately 2955 Ohio Master Gardener Volunteers recognized as “Outstanding Master Gardener Volunteer” at the 2023 MGV State Conference Awards Program held October 12-14 in Greene County near Fairborn. The local Hardin County OSU Extension group was also nominated for four other state awards at the conference. The project ‘Educational Native Plants Landscape Beds’ was recognized as the state winner in the “Community Service Outstanding MGV Project” award category for small sized groups. Mark Watkins was recognized for the “Friend of the OSU Extension MGV Program.” Hardin County was also recognized for their project ‘I Can Eat That? Foraging for Food in Your Backyard’ in the small sized group division for “Backyard and Local Foods Outstanding MGV Project” award category. In addition, the Hardin County group was recognized as a platinum “Standards of Excellence” award winner. Awards presented at the conference were for the previous program year.

Outstanding MGV award winner Kim Thomas was the liaison between the Hardin County Board of Developmental Disabilities and the Hardin County Master Gardeners before she became a MGV. When the MGVs were looking for a property for their educational garden (Friendship Gardens), she knew the property behind Harco Industries where she worked would be perfect. Kim wrote over \$6000 worth of grants to fund this project. She acted as the unofficial secretary of the Friendship Gardens Finance Committee for four years. Kim started advertising and coordinating memorial donations of trees, shrubs, and the memorial signage for those plants. Since she became a MGV, Kim has been treasurer for 4 years, president for 2 years, wrote many weekly articles highlighting areas of the Friendship Gardens for the local newspaper, has been in charge of 3 spring seminars, and designed the Artists’ Garden. Every year, Kim has volunteered at the MGV Fair Booth, Ada Harvest & Herb Festival MGV booth, Plant Sale, and Evening Garden Affair. Kim has also helped purchase, plant, and maintain the Friendship Gardens, and donated vegetables to local food pantries for Grow Ohio. She has presented several educational programs on butterflies at the local library and several fairy garden hands-on demonstrations for children and adults at the Friendship Gardens and local county fair.

The Educational Native Plants Landscape Beds project is maintained for educational purposes to the community. It is located at the Hardin County OSU Extension office in Kenton. Prior to the MGV work, there were public comments to the Extension staff about the unsightly beds. There used to be small evergreens and boxwoods in the landscape when it was decided to convert to native plants because they would grow well there and adapt well to the environment. The care and upkeep of these beds became a MGV Community Service project after they were designed and planted initially by the group. This office building has public access for services from the Extension Office, Bureau of Motor Vehicles, and the Title Office which occupy this facility. This building receives mostly adult public foot traffic on a given day during the business week. There are about 150 people entering this facility each day who have the potential to stop and read the signs identifying the native plants. The MGVs realized this was an opportunity not only to beautify the landscape, but also provide education to the public about native plants at the same time.

The Hardin County Ohio State University Extension Master Gardener Volunteers program was pleased to nominate Mark Watkins as the 2023 Friend of the OSUE Master Gardener Volunteer program. After not working in the Friendship Gardens of Hardin County during COVID, the educational demonstration garden was completely overgrown with weeds. The Master Gardeners worked hard to get things back in order. But the rain garden still needed a lot of work. In the rain garden there is a dry creek bed. On one side of this area, the Master Gardeners wanted to keep the plants, but wanted the other side dug up and planted to grass. Mark brought a tractor to the Friendship Gardens and rototiller to the site. He dug up everything and smoothed out the soil. He then purchased grass seed and planted it along the dry creek bed. In addition, he also helped by working up the other side of the dry creek bed. He trimmed with edging, did weed eating, and sprayed weeds. He also brought up his trailer to put all the weeds in to haul away. The grass has grown nicely, and the rain garden is now flourishing with the desired appropriate plants. Mark has been willing to lend a hand whenever asked. The Hardin County OSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers have appreciated his willingness to give of his time, resources, and talent to make improvements at the Friendship Gardens of Hardin County.

Food insecurity is a growing concern primarily due to lack of resources and inflation. Other factors contributing to scarcity are extreme weather conditions affecting farming and food chain disruption. Hardin County Master Gardeners Kim Thomas and Vickie Phillips developed an education seminar entitled "I Can Eat That? Foraging for Food in Your Backyard" designed to introduce the subject of foraging and how foraging can supplement nutritional intake and expand food sources. The target audience were adults who are engaged in securing food for their households. Kim and Vickie showed specimens of foraged plants for the audience to examine and explained the nutritional benefit of each. They prepared a variety of foods and drinks made from these foraged plants and shared samples for the audience to taste. The audience received a handout of the recipes prepared for the program. Approximately 21 adults were in attendance representing a variety of interests: herbalists, naturalists, and general households. An opportunity for questions and answers resulted in valuable discussions. Many in the audience shared their own cooking experience using foraged foods and most commented that they would explore more foraged food options.

In addition to being recognized for these state awards, the Hardin County Master Gardener Volunteers were recognized with the platinum 'Standards for Excellence' distinction. This is the highest degree of accomplishment for a county Master Gardener Volunteer program, based on guidelines set up by Ohio State University Extension.

Attached photo caption – Kim Thomas (right) was one of ten individuals out of approximately 2955 Ohio Master Gardener Volunteers recognized as “Outstanding Master Gardener Volunteer” at the 2023 MGVS State Conference Awards Program held October 12-14 in Greene County near Fairborn.