**Bladen County Master Gardener Program**

On February 15, 2005, the Bladen County Master Gardener Program began their first class of the year. It has been more than two (2) years since Bladen County has had a functioning Master Gardener Program.

The Extension Master Gardener Program is an educational program designed to enhance public education in consumer horticulture. It provides educational assistance to the citizens of the county concerning lawns, fruits, vegetables, trees, and ornamentals through the utilization of a trained and supervised volunteer staff. Under the guidance and support of Extension agents, selected residents of a county enter a specially designed training program in horticulture. Participants in the program must complete the training program, pass an examination, and volunteer a minimum of 40 hours per year (20 hours in subsequent years) through the local Cooperative Extension Center.

This year’s program has 12 volunteers who have completed the classroom portion of the program. The volunteers attended classes at the Powell-Melvin Agricultural Center on Tuesday and Thursday from 9am until noon from February 15 until April 5, 2005. The graduation luncheon was held on April 12, 2005 to recognize the volunteers.

The Master Gardener volunteers, as a part of Cooperative Extension, must follow certain procedures and responsibilities. These include but are not limited to: volunteers will perform their duties as representatives of NC State University, will follow university policies, and work under the supervision of a NC State employee. Volunteers will perform assigned duties without financial compensation. Volunteers are expected to work with other volunteers, paid staff, and clientele in a professional manner. Volunteers are to provide unbiased, research based information consistent with NC State University recommendations.

When the Extension Master Gardener program began, Master Gardener volunteers mostly answered telephone requests for gardening information. They also staffed plant clinics and information booths. These tasks are still vital to Extension. However, in recent years, creative MGs and Extension agents have recognized the talents which citizens bring to the Extension Master Gardener program that can be utilized in a variety of horticultural activities. Some examples of volunteer opportunities include: create and maintain a demonstration garden, garden with the elderly and handicapped, conduct school gardening program, give talks to groups interested in horticulture, plan and complete community beautification project, and manage a plant diagnostics lab.

The Extension Master Gardener program allows the local Extension to extend education to an ever increasing gardening audience. It also provides the local center with a highly visible way to meet the public demand for information and to develop a strong clientele support group.

Future Master Gardener classes are currently in the planning stage. We are continuing to take applications for entrance into the Bladen County Master Gardener’s program. Dates and times have not been set. For those interested in the Bladen County Master Gardener Program, please contact Corey Crabtree, Horticulture Extension Agent at 910-862-4591.