

Plant Clinic Procedures

In most counties, Master Gardeners staff Plant Clinic phone lines and desks at county Extension offices. Many counties also offer Plant Clinics in their communities, at farmers' markets, fairs and commercial businesses. Plant Clinics are a valuable service to the community, where Oregonians can ask questions about their home or community garden. Those who utilize the services of a Master Gardener Plant Clinic are often referred to as our 'clients'. To ensure high quality answers to questions received at Master Gardener Plant Clinics, it is important that volunteers are trained to recognize and utilize appropriate resources and to consult with OSU Extension faculty and/or expert Master Gardeners, as needed. Appropriate resources include the Pacific Northwest Weed, Insect and Disease Management Handbooks; peer-reviewed journal articles, Extension publications, brochures and hand-outs; eXtension and/or university Extension websites; online materials produced by eXtension and/or university Extension Services; and other resources that contain validated, research-based content. In addition, to utilizing county Extension faculty and expert Master Gardeners, on campus resources (e.g. OSU Plant Clinic; OSU Herbarium, Oregon State Arthropod Collection), Extension specialists, and other OSU faculty should be consulted when needed.

Master Gardener volunteers should utilize these resources to provide research based information to those seeking information or advice on home and/or community gardening. Master Gardener volunteers are not permitted to answer questions for commercial growers, or questions related to commercial production.. Master Gardeners are not permitted to answer questions or provide recommendations related to pasture management, although Master Gardeners can work to identify weeds (using appropriate resources) that were growing in pasture. Master Gardeners are not permitted to identify mushrooms, unless working with a verified mycological expert. County-based Extension Agents determine who qualifies as a local mycological expert.

Limits on Advice that Has Implications on Human Health: Occasionally, a client may submit a sample to or seek advice from the Master Gardener Plant Clinic that could have implications for human health. Examples include: bed bugs, spiders, suspected arthropod-caused skin lesions, pesticide poisoning, poisonous plants, etc. If this is the case, it is important to remember that Master Gardener volunteers are not permitted to offer medical evaluations, diagnoses or advice on treatment. Instead, the client should be referred to a trained professional for these services. Master Gardener volunteers are permitted to utilize appropriate resources to identify a plant or arthropod sample (e.g. bed bugs, poison ivy) – but not lesions, rashes or other symptoms that may have been caused by a plant or an arthropod (e.g. the bite marks or rash that could be caused by bed bugs or poison ivy). OSU Extension faculty staff and volunteers should refer all clients seeking advice on managing any potential life/safety situations to medical or other trained professionals.

Identifying Potentially Poisonous Plants: Often, the samples that are submitted to Plant Clinic make it difficult to confidently arrive at an accurate identification. For example, the client may submit only a small portion plant foliage, or may submit a crushed arthropod sample between two pieces of tape. If this is the case, and especially for those cases where the identity of the plant or arthropod could have implications to human health (i.e. a doctor would treat a patient who ingested a non-poisonous plant different than they would a patient who ingested a poisonous plant), it is important to use appropriate language when communicating findings to a client. An example of appropriate language is: “Based upon the information provided to OSU Extension and from the research conducted, it appears that this plant is a XXXXXX plant, which is listed as not poisonous.”

Marijuana Policy: Oregon State University and the Oregon State University Extension Master Gardener program are recipients of federal funding. Oregon State University and the Oregon State University

Extension Master Gardener program are also governed by the federal Controlled Substances Act, the Drug-Free Workplace Act and the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act. Thus, to guard against risk of losing Federal funding and to adhere to the federal laws that govern our activities, OSU Extension Faculty, Staff and Volunteers do not provide advice or referrals on the culture, care and/or use of marijuana.

Master Gardener volunteers working in the Plant Clinic should be provided with continuing education and support, to ensure that they are current on information, understand appropriate resource use, recognize when they should seek additional help or support, and know that it is more important to accurately say 'we can't answer that question' (for whatever reason – not enough plant material, sample too crushed to identify, no research based resources on the topic) than to provide an incorrect answer.