Extension Master Gardener
Communications Manual

Updated 2022

Logos and Indicia

Logos

All Extension Master Gardener (EMG) logos are available here:
https://mastergardener.ext.vt.edu/2023-logo/

VCE logos are available here:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/14lDlqGBGjqv2B6BKCSYE5IVWrvl61x6Rlgu4JaGNvSU/edit

Many local units also have their own logos. We consider existing logos "grandfathered in" but request that units not create *new* logos. If you'd like a version of the standard EMG logo with your unit's name inserted, email Devon dvj@vt.edu.

When preparing marketing materials, always use the VCE logo **AND** your local EMG logo or the green EMG logo (you do not need to use your local unit logo and the green EMG logo).

Please do **not** make changes to the VCE or EMG logo such as:
  ✗ Stretching it or distorting it
  ✗ Changing colors
  ✗ Adding other elements

Indicia Statements

Whenever you create a flyer, brochure, or other document for public distribution, you must include the indicia statement:

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments. Its programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, military status, or any other basis protected by law.
If you are creating material for an event (training class, webinar, symposium, etc.) you must also include the ADA statement:

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact _____ (name, office) at (phone number/TDD*) during business hours of _____ a.m. and _____ p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.
*TDD number is (800) 828-1120.

More information on VCE's indicia statement can be found here:
https://sites.google.com/view/extintranet/marketing

Messaging

In 2022, Virginia Cooperative Extension contracted with an external marketing firm to rebrand. As part of the rebrand, the firm developed key messaging phrases and ideas for us to use. Incorporating these messaging ideas into your marketing makes the EMG program consistent with the rest of Extension and the other Master Gardener programs.

For webinar trainings on the VCE brand please go to:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gqgGgVwjxMVI2aOUefi6jFHMeZaS7Ui4

VCE Boilerplate and Purpose Statements

Purpose statement

We advance the wellbeing of Virginia-empowering its people, stewarding its resources and shaping its future.

Boilerplate

Virginia Cooperative Extension was established in 1914 and is a partnership between Virginia's two land grant universities: Virginia Tech and Virginia State University. Today, Extension operates out of 107 offices, 11 Agricultural Research and Extension centers, and six 4-H centers across the commonwealth. Our agents, specialists, and volunteers work to assist farmers, empower youth, guide responsible resource management, and advance the wellbeing of all Virginians.

Elevator pitch

As an integral part of both Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, we work in communities across the commonwealth to share knowledge, support businesses, and implement research that advances the wellbeing of all Virginians.

Messaging Pillars

Messaging pillar 1: We understand the science and the context

We know our constituents and understand the unique challenges and opportunities that exist within their communities. From this frame of reference, we put Virginia Tech and Virginia State University knowledge into action and find real solutions.

Key words and phrases:

Opportunity	Local programming
Community	Steward natural resources
Accessible	Improve public health
Engage	Strengthen our food supply chain
Knowledge into action	Support agriculture
Real solutions	

Messaging pillar 2: We advocate broadly and individually

We advocate for the social, economic, and environmental needs of all Virginians. Through community organizations, businesses, and families, we work to improve everyone's wellbeing – starting in Virginia and extending across the world.

Key words and phrases:

Capabilities	Community organizations
Businesses	Diverse staff
Families	Robust programming
Improve wellbeing	Healthy choices
Social, economic, and environmental needs	Forging partnerships
Local and state needs	Valued local agencies and organizations
Needs-driven programs	
Community-level	

Messaging pillar 3: We plan strategically and act immediately

We work on the big issues, partnering with governments and organizations to solve systemic challenges in a way that benefits everyone. Virginians also count on us for their immediate land, health, and community needs to fix problems as they arise or seize opportunities that seem out of reach.

Key words and phrases:

Partnership	Tested
Benefits	Science-based
Proven	Collaboration

Drive	Fix problems
Empower	Seize opportunities
Contribute	Accurate information
Craft	Vibrant workforce
Solve systematic issues	Social justice
Immediate land, health, and community needs	Land protection and restoration

Brand Messaging Checklist

When developing verbal content for VCE here are some questions you should ask yourself:

- Is the language approachable? Remember, we are seen as knowledgeable peers and neighbors. Is this how you'd say it to your neighbor?
- Are there opportunities to infuse language from the Brand Platform? Does the content generally convey VCE's purpose? While the Brand Narrative and Purpose are not meant to be used verbatim, the ideas can often be used in external messaging.
- Does it pass the Brand Voice Dos and Don'ts? Is it friendly enough without being unprofessional? Are you direct without being overbearing? Running through the list will help make sure you're striking the right balance.
- Can you leverage any of the proof points from the pillars to support your content? Pillar language can be used as is. Just make sure you pull in the messages that are most relevant to the piece of content you are creating.
- Which audience are you speaking to? Revisit the audience-specific messaging guidance. Make sure you're incorporating themes and tactics that resonate with your audience.
- Are there places where it makes sense to incorporate more of the "key words" to communicate consistent themes?

Dos and Don'ts

Do
- Include references to Extension in flyers and press releases
- Add the indicia and ADA statement (when necessary) to all public materials
- Make an effort to include messaging from the messaging pillars above in press releases
- Use your logo **and** the Extension logo on flyers/marketing materials

Don't
- Don't write a press release or flyer that does not reference VCE in some way (For example, it should say **Extension** Master Gardeners of [unit], include the VCE logo and your EMG logo, and the indicia statement)
- Don't use EMG communications (social media, newsletters) to say anything that promotes a political position, candidate, or policy
- We are an educational entity. Materials that promote/endorse products or businesses, give opinions on current events, or give other opinions are not appropriate.

- For example, in your role as an EMG, you **can** respond to a message and give advice on how to best treat a horticultural issue. You **cannot** provide a list of the best garden tool brands and where you should buy them.
  - Educational information not backed by a credible source
    - For example, you would not direct someone to a non-Extension blog (like "billsdhalias.com or permaculture.com) or a non-Extension YouTube video when answering a question. To find Extension resources go to: https://extension.org/search/
  - Social Media: Do not "like" or share from pages that are politically affiliated, are outside of our scope of interest, or those that are non-educational.

Marketing

The way in which the local EMG volunteers and programs are promoted all year long (and especially during recruitment) will affect the types of people that are attracted to the training classes. Promotion of the projects and accomplishments of EMGs is necessary so when it is time to recruit, interest has been created among people appropriate to be recruited -- those who want to teach as well as learn about horticulture.

If public relations materials improperly present EMGs as free garden maintenance staff, then people who only want to plant flowers and pull weeds will be attracted. Volunteers with these expectations will be less willing to volunteer in appropriate capacities (such as answering horticulture questions, staffing plant clinics, or conducting water quality protection programs). In addition, questions will be raised as to the appropriateness of free garden maintenance activities conducted by representatives of VCE, an agency committed to education. If, however, press releases and reports capitalize on the EMG implemented homeowner lawn-care program that has reduced nitrogen inputs into the local watershed or the 4-H youth gardening program for at-risk youth that has reduced recidivism by 75 percent, then this will present EMGs as volunteer educators who teach people about the importance of environmentally-sound horticulture practices or improve life quality for individuals.

Individuals who are interested in a great opportunity to make a contribution to the community will then be attracted to VCE and the EMG training.

Promotion will also assist in developing resources. With increased public awareness, other groups become interested and willing to work with EMGs toward common goals. Community businesses and organizations are more willing to assist with supplies and services if they have an understanding of EMG activities as obtained through accurate promotional efforts. Promotion and marketing of EMG activities also offers the perfect opportunity to publicly recognize community supporters, which strengthens relationships with community groups.

Promoting the accomplishments and activities of EMGs will be a major factor in determining the success of the EMG programs. Promotion generates:

- Free publicity

- Prospective EMGs
- Increased community involvement and support
- A better public understanding of VCE and EMGs

If no one knows what EMGs are doing, programming is bound to have less impact. Likewise, if media portrays educational programming as conducted by EMGs or EMG associations, then the connection to VCE, Virginia Tech, and Virginia State University will be lost, reducing the value and impact of the relationship. A successful publicity campaign, however, will undoubtedly increase community participation and awareness.

General promotional materials should emphasize the value of EMGs to the community and the need for the EMGs to provide information and educational services to the community. Community links and impacts that are made through schools, businesses, community groups, etc. are especially helpful in generating positive public relations within the local communities. For these reasons, the PR team should use quality annual reports as the basis of promotional materials.

Marketing Materials

When promoting events, EMGs should use [VCE EMG marketing materials](#) found on the EMG coordinator/agent section of the website. These VCE marketing items provide sight recognition and lend credibility to the information or event. EMGs should wear VCE name tags to represent themselves.

Business cards: Business cards with information about your local help desk are available and can be ordered through the regular VCE business card ordering system (the agent or UAA can order here). These cards are useful for providing contact information for help desks.

Brochures or other print materials: Templates for brochures and other print materials are available through the EMG state office. To have these materials printed, you will need to download and fill out [the brochure request form here](#) and email it to Devon dvj@vt.edu. When you receive your customized brochure template, you can print it locally.

Additional information and templates can be found on the [EMG website.](#)

Banners: The State Office can also help you customize an existing banner template, or (in some cases) work with you to develop a custom banner or sign to suit your needs. Local units are responsible for printing the banners locally.

Table cloths: Many units have table cloths with the VCE and EMG logos. The State Office does not have a supply of table cloths to distribute, but we can coordinate among multiple units to place a bulk order if there is enough interest/demand for table cloths to make ordering in bulk cheaper. If there is not enough demand to make a bulk order feasible, you can order a table cloth independently.

Working with the Media

Public relations planning is just as important as planning educational programming or any other part of volunteer management. The PR team should work with all other teams to plan a

calendar of events for the year and build/maintain a media contacts list. Determine what happens each week or month. Remember that good media efforts start two to three months before the event actually happens!

Media coverage is good for:
- Announcing news to niche or mass audiences
- Driving traffic to your website
- Increasing program attendance
- Sharing on social media to significantly increase views
- Increasing your visibility in search engines
- Increasing your credibility with colleagues and the public

If you do not have a media list, email Devon. We can prepare a list for you using Virginia Tech's media software.

Develop an Effective News Release

A news (or press) release is a summary of an important event or update that you send out to local media in the hopes of them running it in the newspaper (or online newspaper) or calling you to ask for a TV/radio interview. Write a news release when:

- **You have an interesting story to tell.** For example, if your volunteer or project just won an award
- **You have important information to relay**. For example, if you have an upcoming training class, event, or spring plant sale. Alternatively, if you want to provide timely horticultural information via the media, such as "it's time to plant your spring garden."
- **You want to get "ahead" of a brewing issue**. For example, you know that the spotted lanternfly was just confirmed in your county and you want to tell people what that means.

Start by planning:
- What do you want to communicate?
- What is the one takeaway you want the audience to remember?
- How will you do this?

If you don't know exactly what your key message is, your audience won't either. It can take some time to develop a strong message, and you will need to spend time honing it down--you can't tell people everything.

The "Message house" is a useful tool for developing your message. The components of the "message house" are:

Key Message (or Main Message). 1 sentence, 1 thought. If the audience remembered just one thing about your conversation, this single statement should capture it explicitly. It's the 30-second trailer Hollywood would make of your idea.

1. **The Core Messages.** 3 messages that support the Key Message. Each is 1 sentence, 1 thought. Each adds depth to/elaborates on the Key Message
2. **Evidence, Proof and Support.** You justify your proof in two ways:

- Rational evidence is facts, statistics, qualified research, thorough analysis, best practices, case studies and considered reasoning.

- Emotional evidence is stories, testimonials, personal experience and situational anecdotes.

The best mixture is both rational and emotional. As the saying goes, rational persuades, but emotion motivates.
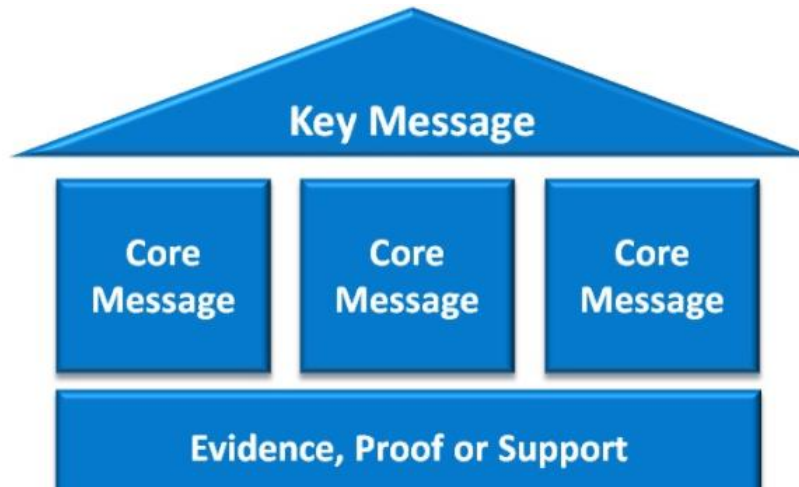
Start with a strong key message: There are five points to remember when writing a news release: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, and WHY. The answers should appear in the first sentence or two, called a lead. A strong lead captures the attention of the readers or listeners and makes them want to know more. After the lead, each succeeding paragraph should be of declining importance. It helps a reader to learn the important facts of a story in the first few lines. If it is necessary to cut parts of the news release, the editor can cut from the bottom, where the least important information details should be found.

Press release best practices:

- Have someone proof your release.
- Set up Google Alerts for your unit
- Always include your website in your release.
- Make sure you leverage all resulting media coverage on your website, through social media and in framed copies in your office.
- Be brief when writing a news release. One double-spaced typed page has a better chance of being used than two double-spaced typed pages. A two-page item takes up more space or time than most editors (print or broadcast) will usually give one item.
- Check the story for accuracy. Never guess on names, dates, times, or places.

Things to remember when writing press releases

- You can put together a team of volunteers to work on media; appoint one group member to be in charge.
- Be sure the name of your local unit and the name, address, email, and phone numbers of the Extension office or contact person are at the top left of each page of information.

- If preparing a news release, make sure the sheet tells when the information is to be released (e.g. "for immediate release" or "hold until December 1").
- If the PSA or calendar of events information is to run for a specified time, mark it with both the numerical date and the day of the week (e.g., "For use Sunday, December 20, through Sunday, December 27.")
- Always give the exact day and date of an event.
- Keep a record of all media contacts made by EMGs. This may save time and trouble in the future.

Developing messages for soundbites or elevator pitches

If you are putting together a short soundbite or elevator pitch, remember the 27-9-3 RULE:

<div align="center">

27 words said in less than
9 seconds with no more than
3 points discussed

</div>

For example: VSU Small Ruminant Program: *Demand for sheep and goat products provides opportunities for farmers, but many lack the knowledge needed for success. VSU helps by providing valuable information on production.*

Develop a Press List

In order to know what to do with your press release (where to send it!) you need to have a press list. This is a list of media outlets in your area; you may already have relationships with a few local news stations or papers and you should prioritize those.

If you don't have a press list, you can look up local media outlets and start building one here: www.abyznewslinks.com

Consider Audience

When preparing media materials, it is essential to select the target audience, and then use the media that best reach that audience.

Different groups of people respond to different languages and techniques. For that reason, the writer of public information must be conscious of the receiver's language and communicate information in those terms. Any time you prepare media for the public, ask yourself:
For the public audience I am trying to reach:

- To whom am I speaking?
- What are their needs?
- How will the information I have affect those needs?
- What kind of information does the audience need to take action, make a decision, or participate in a program?
- What level of existing knowledge or understanding does this audience have?
- What will the audience get from this?
- What phrases, metaphors, pictures, and media formats will relate best to my

audience?

Digital Media

Websites

Every VCE Office has a website via https://ext.vt.edu/offices.html. Please check this page for your office and make sure the Master Gardener program is featured on your unit website.

We are aware that many units maintain third-party websites in addition to the official websites offered through https://ext.vt.edu. **These websites must belong to the association.** There are risks associated with using a third party website as your official Extension Master Gardener website that include: there are no Virginia Tech-approved vendors for domain registration and only one approved hosting provider, all images must be sourced appropriately, you must have an appropriate privacy statement, and all content must be ADA compliant.

The State Office is unable to provide technical assistance for association websites. For assistance with a https://ext.vt.edu page, or to request edit access to your unit's page, please contact the web manager for CALS Communications and Marketing: https://www.communications.cals.vt.edu/people.html

Newsletters

Virginia Tech currently has no approved email software. MailChimp and Constant Contact are not approved for use by Virginia Tech Departmental Software. That means that you cannot pay for these services using Virginia Tech funds. We are aware of the difficulty this causes and have advocated (and will continue to advocate, along with many other departments) that Virginia Tech approve an email software for use.

Design Software

There are a few options for designing attractive flyers, social media graphics, or other items. For large or expensive items like banners or signs, the state office can also provide design assistance to make sure you have the correct files for printing.

Adobe Spark: As a Virginia Tech employee, you can use Adobe Spark. To get access to Spark for free, contact departmental software. Once you are logged in to Spark, you can create graphics and other items and use a pre-loaded VCE brand template (contact Devon dvj@vt.edu for access to this).

Canva: Like Spark, Canva is an online design tool you can use to make flyers, graphics, and other items. The free version of Canva is sufficient for many needs--if you want to save a palette of brand colors or share document among different users, you can pay for a premium version (which is approved by VT software).

PowerPoint: PowerPoint is also good for designing graphics and presentations. The advantage of PowerPoint is that you are able to share files with others and ask them to make changes.

With online design tools like Canva or Spark, you can only export an image version of your product to share.

Social Media

Social media policy

Please review the Virginia Tech social media policy available here: https://policies.vt.edu/social-media-policy2.pdf *(Please note that some of the content of this policy is designed with Virginia Tech university departments (e.g. the College of Engineering or Office of Advancement) in mind.)*

Please review and use Virginia Cooperative Extension's social media policy for basic information like naming conventions, the number of accounts to create, and which settings to choose when creating a page, click here for the VCE social media policy.

Please follow Virginia Tech's guidelines as outlined in the social media policy regarding appropriate content, using professional discretion when liking/following other accounts, and setting "house rules" that govern your local unit.

We do not have specific guidelines about which social media platforms you should/should not use--this is up to your discretion. At a state level we focus mostly on Facebook, and also use Instagram and Twitter. You also do not NEED to have social media if you don't want it.

We do not have specific guidelines about managing social media pages. Some units choose to have volunteers manage pages, some have a coordinator or agent manage pages. As long as you are following Virginia Tech's guidelines about content appropriateness, you can choose the arrangement that works best for you and your unit.

If you are new to social media or looking for a more in-depth training, the national Extension service has created a training site: https://sites.google.com/a/extension.org/social-media-resources/welcome

Video

Zoom recordings

When using your Virginia Tech Zoom account, meetings can be "recorded to the cloud" and will become available here: https://video.vt.edu/home (you must log in using your Virginia Tech PID). **Note that this website is often called Kaltura.**

Recordings can also be edited using https://video.vt.edu/my-media. To trim out the beginning or end of a zoom recording, locate the video in your library then click the small pencil-shaped edit button that appears to the right of the video thumbnail. Then click "launch editor" (button to the right of the video).

NOTE: If you are using Zoom with a sponsored PID (are not a Virginia Tech employee) you do not have access to video.vt.edu!

Video editing

From time to time agents or volunteers may wish to create educational videos. If you want professional video editing software, CALS Communications recommends Camtasia.

Camtasia 2020 is an easy to use video editor with built-in features for screen recording. Add a voiceover to a PowerPoint presentation. Edit videos recorded with your smartphone. Download a free trial from Techsmith. View online tutorials for getting started. Purchase form Departmental Software for $170.

Additional Camtasia resources:
- A Friendly Guide to Video Production
- How to Create Videos for Extension Education: An Innovative Five-Step Procedure
- The Ultimate Guide to Easily Make Instructional Videos

There are many more training videos/presentations for creating videos on the CALS Communications resources website: https://www.communications.cals.vt.edu/resources.html

You can also record a presentation in PowerPoint! Instructions here: PowerPoint: Record a Slide Show with Narration and Slide Timings

Video storage and distribution

For "storing" videos online, you have two options: Kaltura or YouTube. You cannot just upload a video file directly to Canvas or to a website--you have to put it on YouTube or Kaltura first, then embed the video player or paste a link for people to access the video.

If you don't want the video to be available to the public and visible only to those with the link: In YouTube, set the publishing options to "unlisted" and the video will not appear in your public account but you can send the link to whoever you want to access it. In Kaltura, on the edit page for the video, go to "publishing" tab, then select "unlisted"--now the URL visible in your navigation bar can be copy/pasted and sent to those you want to see the video.

Image Attribution and Copyright

When creating fliers, presentations, or any other media shared publicly, do not simply copy/paste images you find on the internet (e.g. in a Google image search)--even if you provide a link back to the original website or author!

When you source digital images for presentations or otherwise, you must be sure you are choosing images **licensed for reuse**. These training materials, provided by Virginia Tech libraries, are designed to provide guidance for you and your volunteers. We recommend that you at least review the "Introduction to copyright" module:

- Introduction to Copyright for Extension Master Gardeners: Provides an overview of copyright, what is copyrighted, and how you can/can't use copyrighted material.
- Introduction to Creative Commons for Extension Master Gardeners: Creative Commons is a licensing system that defines how certain material can be reused.

- [Introduction to Fair Use for Extension Master Gardeners](): "Fair use" allows for reuse of copyrighted material in certain circumstances.
- [Introduction to Publicly Available Resources for Extension Master Gardeners](): Provides descriptions of resources you can use without copyright issues.

Photos taken by you or by another Master Gardener (who has given you permission to use them)
are fine to use in communications materials. In fact, photos of your unit activities are preferable
to stock photos in most instances since they add authenticity and personalization to your communications materials.

No matter where your images are from, they all must have attribution (with the exception of photos taken from an "attribution free" source, see below). Even images in the public domain should have attribution. For example, if you find a photo on Bugwood you'd like to use, insert the photo with a caption underneath containing the photo title (Bugwood photo titles are numbers) and Bugwood attribution line listed on the website (it will look like something like this: "5606660" Gerald Holmes, Strawberry Center, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Bugwood.org, CC BY-NC 3.0).

Creative Commons

[Creative Commons]() (CC) is a licensing system for sharing images and other work openly. Anyone can publish their work using a CC license. With CC, you may choose to publish in a way that allows open reuse, limits reuse to non-commercial projects, prevents derivatives of your work and more. [Learn more about licensing options with CC](). Look for CC licenses on images you might like to use. Many photos on Flickr and all Bugwood photos are published with CC licenses.

Elements of proper attribution for a Creative Commons license:

- Title of photo if it has one (linked to website page where photo is found). If the photo has no title, simply link the word "Photo" to the website page where the photo is found.
- Photographer (linked to his or her profile page, if possible)
- CC license type, i.e., CC BY-NC 3.0, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, etc. (ideally, linked to license deed)

Image Sources

For specific botanical images, https://images.bugwood.org/ is an excellent source for IPM, entomology, and invasive species images. Citation information https://www.bugwood.org/ImageUsage.cfm)

Another site associated with Bugwood: https://www.ipmimages.org/ (citation information: https://www.ipmimages.org/about/imageusage.cfm).

Also, https://www.discoverlife.org/ (same thing with the licensing, it depends on the photo, more info here: https://www.discoverlife.org/ap/copyright.html)

National Parks Service media library (public domain, attribution still required): https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/news/photosmultimedia.htm

USDA Agricultural Research Service image library (public domain, attribution still required): https://www.ars.usda.gov/oc/images/image-gallery/

Va.Tech Plant Problem Image Gallery

The PlantFinder section of the Missouri Botanical Garden site can be used with proper attribution: Ihttp://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/Portals/0/Media%20Room/PDFs/ImagePolicy_2012.pdf:

Flickr accounts maintained by USDA or government agencies are a good source of images:.

Some specific accounts:
- For Native Bees: https://www.flickr.com/people/usgsbiml/
- For Ag/farming/nutrition: https://www.flickr.com/people/usdagov/
- For soil: https://www.flickr.com/people/87743206@N04/
- For micrographs: Berkshire Community College Bioscience Image library is a grant-funded project to produce images in the public domain (attribution required): https://www.flickr.com/photos/146824358@N03/

Sources for attribution free images (these do not require attribution, though it is still the best practice: https://unsplash.com and https://pixabay.com

Guidelines for Writing Gardening Articles

By Nancy Knauss, Penn State Extension, State Master Gardener Coordinator

Audience
- You are writing for a broad audience, some experienced gardeners and some complete novices.
- Use words that are familiar to your audience and avoid jargon and technical terms (e.g. "trees and shrubs" rather than "woody ornamentals").

Style and point of view
- Keep your audience in mind. Provide an answer to a question or help them solve a problem. The writing should be about the customer, the problem they face, and information that can help them.
- If your writing answers the questions people are searching for on the Internet, using the terms they are using, then it becomes more Internet "search friendly."
- The more questions you can answer in the same piece, around the same topic, the better—but they do have to be related and pertinent to the subject matter.
- Be careful that your article does not start to read like an FAQ (unless it really is an FAQ).
- Use active voice whenever possible. (E.g. "Purchase an instrument to measure light." Not, "An instrument to measure light can be purchased."

- You may use first-person voice, especially when sharing advise from your own gardening experience. (E.g. In a review of the types of celery and how to grow them, the author had a favorite cutting celery and simply wrote: "My favorite cutting celery is 'Affina'."
- Bullets are helpful if you are listing plants or giving step-by-step instruction.

Newsworthiness
- We want to feature trends in gardening, newer cultivars of plants, unusual or hard-to-find plants that we know are garden worthy—inspiration for aspiring gardeners paired with steps they can take to achieve their goals.
- An article may discuss current weather conditions or a current pest. However, these pieces will be published as "news items" rather than evergreen articles and will expire when they are no longer relevant.
- It is OK to repurpose content you have written. Review it to ensure the information is still relevant to the readers, and refreshed and updated, if need be.

Integrity
- Remember that all information must be research based.
- Ideally, articles should be a synthesis of information seen through the lens of your own gardening experience.
- Do not plagiarize! If information should be cited.

Length
Concise writing is best. There is no set length for what makes a good article or news piece. It just needs to adequately convey the message, or provide enough details to solve the problem, tell the story, etc. It could be 700-900 words or longer, or it could be as short as 300 words.

Botanical nomenclature:
The first time you introduce a plant in the article, write the common name and include the botanical name in parentheses right after. Within the article you can switch back and forth to avoid monotony.

Exceptions would be plants like tomato, which would be somewhat pretentious to write about as *Solanum lycopersicum*. It might add interest to your article to identify the botanical name of a plant, but then abandon it and stick with the common name in this case.

There are some exceptions to this rule, but generally this is what you'll write:

> Common name (all lower case unless the common name includes a proper noun), followed by genus and species name, italicized and within parentheses, for example:
> German iris (*Iris germanica*)
> sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*)

Plants are usually known by their cultivar names. Cultivar names are not italicized, but they are capitalized, and the specific name is contained within single quotes; for example, *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' would be written
> 'Forest Pansy' redbud (*Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy')

Varieties and other hybrid rules:
Varieties, which are naturally occurring plants that reproduce true to type, are identified like this:

white redbud (*Cercis canadensis* var. *alba)*
Note that "var." is not italicized or capitalized.

Seed mixes are a mix of several cultivars and do not need to be set off in single quotes: For example:
Zinnia elegans Berry Basket Mix

Interspecies cross would have an "×" in the middle; for example:
saucer magnolia (*Magnolia × soulangiana),* which is a cross between *M. denudata* and *M. liliiflora*
Note that once a genus has been identified, it can be abbreviated by its first letter, with the species following, as I've done with the parents of the saucer magnolia.

An intergeneric cross is preceded by an "×" and followed by the new genus epithet **without** a space in between. For example, the cross of foamflower (*Tiarella* spp.) and coral bells (*Heuchera* spp.) is written:
×Heucherella
Most often it would be followed by a cultivar name written in the typical fashion (upper case, not italicized, with single quotes); for example:
×Heucherella 'Alabama Sunrise'

In both cases the "×" is not italicized or capitalized.

spp. and sp.:

If you are talking about genera (i.e., multiple species of a genus), write the botanical name followed by "spp."; for example:
Astilbe spp.
In the case of astilbe, its common and botanical name are the same. I was surprised to discover that it's also known as false goatsbeard! So, if later in the article you wanted to talk about astilbe species, you can do it that way.

If you unsure of what species or cultivar an individual plant is (for example, if you are visiting a garden or the tag is long gone), you can identify it simply by its genus followed by "sp." For example:
An image might have a pretty pink phlox and you can just call it *Phlox* sp.

Both spp. and sp. are not capitalized or italicized.

An excellent reference for proper nomenclature is the Missouri Botanical Garden website, at www.missouribotanicalgarden.org.

Sample Social Media Policies

Northern Shenandoah

Mission: To share knowledge and empower our communities through online social media outreach.

Objectives:
1. To **educate** NSV communities on horticultural topics through research-based information sharing.
2. To **increase awareness** of the VCE Master Gardener program and projects within the NSV Unit.
3. To **publicize** VCE events, especially those supported by the NSVMGA, or community partner events.
4. To **connect** with NSV communities through online social media.

Communication methods:
1. Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/NSVMGA/, established 2010
2. Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/nsv_master_gardeners/, established 2021
3. Twitter: https://twitter.com/nsvmga, established 2014 (reserved, inactive)
4. Pinterest: https://www.pinterest.com/NSVMGA/_saved/, established 2014 (reserved, inactive)
5. YouTube:
6. MailChimp Email Marketing

Acceptable activities:
- Providing educational horticultural information related to seasonally and topically appropriate subjects supported by research-based, objective, non-commercial sources or websites, most often ending in .edu or .gov or a related cooperative extension site.
- Promoting events, with included educational information when relevant, such as
  - VCE events (such as Well Clinics, VCE Family & Consumer Science events, 4-H events)
  - VCE-EMG events (such as MG College, other unit education)
  - NSVMGA supported events (such as Speakers Bureau, GardenFest, Symposium), and
  - horticulture events from community partners.
- Posting at least once to twice per day depending on platform. Frequent posts during events are encouraged. Review insights, where available, for optimal posting times.
- Sharing a performance summary quarterly through a report at an NSVMGA board meeting.
- Encouraging other volunteers to contribute on a topic of interest or as they can.
- Using photos for all posts, provided by EMGs when possible.
  - Protecting volunteers' identities by using title and first name (EMG John, etc.).
  - Protecting children by only using photos where a release is on file with VCE or a partner organization, or where a child's face is not visible.

Non-acceptable activities:
- "Liking," "following," or "sharing" non-horticultural, political, or controversial pages, nor those outside of our scope of interest.

- Posting of political positions, candidates, or policies or taking part in political discussions.
- Sharing home remedies or other non-research-based information.
- Sharing information not supported by research-based, objective, non-commercial sources or websites
- Sharing posts from commercial projects or businesses or implying endorsement of the same.
    - EMGs cannot share "the best" brand of something to buy nor where to buy something.
    - EMGs may be vague by recommending starting with local businesses or nurseries.
- Providing opinions on current events or other topics.
- Deleting posts that include hate speech, dangerous information, are derogatory, or are generally considered offensive. Involve VCE faculty/staff and possibly state EMG office when offensive comments are happening as deleting may be considered infringement of free speech.
- Publishing posts that include hate speech, dangerous information, are derogatory, or are generally considered offensive in any way.
- Clicking any phishing or spam links that could jeopardize the security of the page.
- Adding editors or administrators or changing access for other volunteers without discussing with the lead of that social media platform.

Best Practices in posts or comments:
- Use ONLY the current "VCE Pest Management Guide" for chemical controls.
- If you discuss chemical controls, you MUST advise clients to "read and follow the label."
- Do not address medical concerns, including parasites, or ID bites from spiders, ticks, or snakes. Advise Clients to see a medical professional.
    - If an insect is not easily identifiable, discuss with the VCE agent about sending it to the insect ID lab.
    - Snake ID should go to the DGIF Wildlife Conflict Hotline at 855-571-9003, or contact DGIF Biologist (as of 2/20) Fred Frenzel (Clarke, Frederick, Shenandoah, Warren) at 540-984-4101 or DGIF Biologist David Kocka (Page) at 540-248-9360.
- Don't recommend homemade potions.
- Only advise homeowners. Refer commercial clients to the VCE agent.
- Don't ID mushrooms. Refer the client to the Mycological Association of DC.
- Don't discuss food preservation, preparation, or nutrition. Refer clients to the VCE Family and Consumer Sciences Agent.
- In case of pesticide spill emergencies, advise the client to call the 800 number on the pesticide label.
- For Poison emergencies, advise the client to call Virginia Poison Center at 1-800-222-1222.

Prince William

The Mission Statement of the Master Gardeners of Prince William (MGPW) is to provide current research-based, horticultural/ environmental outreach and education programs for Prince William area residents.

Objective of the VCE Prince William Master Gardener Volunteers and Extension Facebook Pages, Instagram, Twitter and Pinterest

The VCE-Prince William Master Gardener accounts serve a number of different purposes in advancing our organizational mission. Objectives

- to develop awareness of Master Gardeners and their connection with Virginia Cooperative Extension,
- to create an online space for research based educational opportunities and information sharing,
- to create an additional platform to promote in-person educational opportunities and to strengthen community relationships
- to reach audiences that are not being reached or targeted through traditional methods of communication and advertising.

Goals

1. To share educational resources and other related educational information with our stakeholders
2. To increase the visibility of VCE Prince William Master Gardeners in the community.
3. To build awareness and understanding of Master Gardeners and Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE).
4. To promote Master Gardener and VCE events.

Outline of acceptable posts on the Prince William Master Gardeners Social Media platforms

1. Educational information related to seasonally and topically appropriate subject matter. This includes reputable, non-commercial, non-political sources,(from .edu, Extension, or .gov) sites among others.
2. Promote VCE events and events from our community partners. These could include Speakers Bureau talks, MG workshops, VCE Agriculture and Natural Resources, Family and Consumer Services or 4-H events, when applicable.

Outline of unacceptable actions on the MG social media platforms.

- All social media platforms associated with VCE Prince William are not politically affiliated. Anyone acting on behalf of the MG Facebook page will not post anything that promotes a political position, candidate, or policy. Nor will they use the Master Gardener page to take part in political discussions online.
- We are an educational entity. Posts that promote/endorse products or businesses, give opinions on current events, or give other opinions are not appropriate.
  - For example, the MG page can respond to a message and give advice on how to best treat a horticultural issue. The MG page cannot post a list of the best garden tools and where you should buy them.
- Educational information not backed by a credible source
  - For example, we would not direct someone to a non-Extension blog or YouTube video when answering a question.
- We do not "like" or share from pages that are politically affiliated, are outside of our scope of interest, or those that are non-educational.
- The general guideline for frequency of posting should aim for 2-3 times daily. Optimal timing can be obtained from Insights.
- Periodic audits of analytics of each platform, ideally, should be done monthly.
- Management of negative, inflammatory speech, or false posts/comments will be removed promptly.
- Develop routine for obtaining media releases for public programs.

- "Anyone who violates these guidelines will be removed from their administrative role. If there is a question about appropriateness of a post or page "like," contact

Sample Communications Plan

This plan is adapted from the Norfolk Communications Plan by Jill Lewis. In Norfolk, volunteers with communications responsibilities are organized into a communications committee with an communications editorial team that is responsible for reviewing outgoing communications. An outline of committee roles and responsibilities should be included with your unit's plan, along with specific duties for any regular communications items (such as a plan for distributing social media responsibilities).

The Communications Committee oversees publicity, website updates, social media, publication of the blog, and promotes educational and training events as stated in the [unit bylaws].

Goals (What do we want to achieve?):
- Increase number of social media releases for each EMG event, including sharing to local community Facebook groups.
- Press release for each major EMG event
  - Maintain current media list for [county/area]
- Increase number of contacts
- Ensure consistency of communication through use of the [local unit] communications editorial team [this would be a group of EMGs who copy edit and approve any external communications]
- Continue to push related and useful content throughout social media to spread our mission to community members and volunteers. Consider cross utilization of created content as the best method to accomplish this goal.
- Increase internal communication to keep EMGs informed of both upcoming events and successful recent events.

Guidelines:
- Consistent and ongoing internal (for EMG only) and external (for the public) communication is critical to the organization's continued success.
- Understanding of the most successful means of communication will streamline the work of the committee.
- Key committee assignments and responsibilities will lead to increased success and job satisfaction for committee members.

Tactics (How will be achieve our goals?):
- Buy-in from all EMGs as well as committee members will increase program success.
- A consistent message and process will be most effective in spreading educational information and program awareness.
- Clear delineation of committee assignments and responsibilities.

Procedures:
- To ensure consistent and ongoing internal and external communication the communications committee proposes:
- Project Leaders/Committee Chairs requiring advertising and external and internal communications products about an event will contact a Communications Committee co-chair and request such assistance. Project Leaders will provide all relevant detail concerning the event, whether date specific or ongoing, as well as photograph files in pdf or jpeg formats. All external communications (for public newspapers or newsletters, flyers, bookmarks, business cards, etc.) representing the [local unit] or its projects, other than current social media programs, should be presented to the Communications Committee no later than the first of the month prior to the event. Items for internal communication release will continue to be disseminated through the Eblast Coordinator.
- All written products for external communications will be vetted by at least one member of the communications editorial team.
- Timeliness is key. Since anything distributed to the public will need to be reviewed by the Communications Committee or a Committee Co-chair; flyers, bookmarks, business cards, etc. will need to be presented to be reviewed before events.
- Each item must include the proper branding as directed by Virginia Cooperative Extension. These items include:
  - Indicia statement (on everything except a "business" card):
    Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments. Its programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, military status, or any other basis protected by law.
  - For any event for the public, indicia statement above and ADA statement below:
    *If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact the VCE Office at [number] for assistance during business hours of 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event. *TDD number is (800) 828-1120.*
  - The EMG/VCE paired logo

Extension Media, Blogs, and Resources

VCE Publications page:
http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/

VCE
https://ext.vt.edu
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/VirginiaCooperativeExtension

VT College of Ag and Life Sciences
News: https://www.cals.vt.edu/about/news

Agency 229
https://www.agency229.cals.vt.edu/

VSU College of Agriculture
http://www.agriculture.vsu.edu/
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/VsuCollegeOfAgriculture/
YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMRWJG7BSFzcN4Y4TVGllog

The Mid-Atlantic Regional Fruit Loop: The Virginia Fruit Page - Extension, Research and Teaching in Fruit Crops
https://www.virginiafruit.ento.vt.edu/

Virginia Fruit Insect updates blog – Doug Pfeiffer (also very good for spotted lanternfly updates)
https://virginiafruitinsectupdates.blogspot.com/

Virginia Tech Tree Fruit Extension and Outreach
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/VtechPomology

Tree Fruit Horticulture Updates
https://blogs.ext.vt.edu/tree-fruit-horticulture/

Master Food Volunteer Insights blog
https://blogs.ext.vt.edu/masterfoodvolunteers/

Virginia Ag Pest and Crop Advisory updates blog (also an email list)
https://blogs.ext.vt.edu/ag-pest-advisory/

VCE Soils
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/IheartVAsoil

VA Forest Landowner Education Program
https://forestupdate.frec.vt.edu
-        They also have a newsletter: https://forestupdate.frec.vt.edu/newsletter.html
-        Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/VFLEP

Virginia Tech Eastern Shore AREC Crop & Soil Environmental Sciences
Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/EasternShore.Soils/

Virginia Tech Eastern Shore AREC Plant Pathology
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/vtesarecpp (both the Eastern Shore AREC pages are awesome!)

Catawba Sustainability Center
https://www.vtrc.vt.edu/Catawba_Sustainability_Center0.html
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/VTcatawba

Hops at Virginia Tech
https://ext.vt.edu/agriculture/commercial-horticulture/hops.html
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/HopsVT

VT PPWS Weed ID guide

http://oak.ppws.vt.edu/~flessner/weedguide/
Weed ID clinic: https://www.ppws.vt.edu/extension/weedid-clinic.html
VT Ag weeds Twitter (really Michael Flessner): https://twitter.com/VTAgWeeds
VT Turf weeds Twitter (really Shawn Askew): https://twitter.com/VTTurfweeds

VT Turf
YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB1t8yy3W8L964AUb2brd_w

Hampton Roads AREC
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/HRAREC/

Southern Piedmont Agricultural Research and Extension Center
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/VTSPAREC/

Tidewater Agricultural Research and Extension Center
Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/TidewaterAREC/ (appears inactive)

Parasitic Plants research news
https://www.ppws.vt.edu/research/westwood-lab/westwood-lab-publications.html (really the
site for Westwood labs, a parasitic plant lab in PPWS)

VT News Extension feed:
https://vtx.vt.edu/content/vtx_vt_edu/en/tags.html/vtx_vt_edu:extension

Extension Social Media training site:
https://sites.google.com/a/extension.org/social-media-resources/welcome

Image Resources

USGS Bee Inventory and Monitoring Lab (for photos of native bees)
https://www.flickr.com/photos/usgsbiml/albums

Bugwood image library: https://images.bugwood.org/