



**MASTER GARDENER**  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION

## CMG GardenNotes #016

# CMG Program – Fielding Questions: Tips

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As a Colorado Master Gardener volunteer, you will have opportunities to answer gardening questions in a wide variety of situations. The following hints will help you be prepared.

## Colorado State University Extension

Remember that you are representing Colorado State University Extension in your county or area.

- Identify yourself as a Colorado State University Extension Master Gardener volunteer, as a Colorado Master Gardener, or in a similar form that your county coordinator/horticulture specialist directs.
- We empower Coloradans to make decisions using research-based information.
- We give clients research-based information only.
- Treat clients in the manner you would like to be treated – courteously and professionally.
- The role of CSU Extension and the Colorado Master Gardener program is education, not regulation.

## About Questions

- There are no dumb questions; treat each question seriously.
- Questions are not context free. There is always a situation behind the question. Ask for specifics so you can answer the question well.
- The first question asked may not reflect the real concern. You may have to “dig deeper.”
- We empower clients to make choices, we do not make the choice for them.
- Many questions do not have an answer because:
  - We do not have enough information.
  - Some topics do not have a research base for information.
  - They may relate to personal values or expectations.

## What Clients Want

- To get information.
- To verify their own understanding or diagnosis.
- For you to agree with them. Stand firm on research-based information and recommendations.
- To justify emotional decisions with facts.

- To vent.
- To have you listen to them.
- Services beyond the scope of the program. Review with them what the program is for – education – and refer to businesses or agencies that may provide the services requested. When in doubt, check with your coordinator/horticulture specialist.

## Your Information Sources

Look up information in Extension materials such as CMG GardenNotes, PlantTalk™ scripts, and CSU Extension Fact Sheets and publications. When using the internet, always look for **educational** resources (use site: .edu in your search engine). **Read directly from the research-based information and cite references used.**

## Questions About Pesticides

Our role is to help clients understand non-chemical and chemical options related to pest management issues. All information related to the use of any pesticide must come from Extension resources. Any pest management questions beyond the scope of the Fact Sheet should be referred to your county coordinator/horticulture specialist.

For information about pesticide toxicity, refer the client directly to the **National Pesticide Information Network**, <http://npic.orst.edu> which is sponsored by the EPA and Oregon State University. Colorado Master Gardeners *do not* discuss pesticide toxicity with clients.

## Diagnosing Problems

- See GardenNotes #102 *Diagnosing Plant Disorders*, for details to guide you.
- Ask questions to help you visualize the situation or problem. For example, say “I am trying to picture your situation in my mind. Let me see if I understand what you are saying” (and repeat it back in your own words).
- As you diagnose a problem, be flexible about receiving additional information. As details unfold, you may find you are headed in the wrong direction. In this situation you could say “With that piece of information, the situation just changed. Let us back up and look at this again...”
- Usually there is inadequate information to confirm a diagnosis. The best we can do is to suggest some possibilities. You could say “Based on the information you provided, the problem could be...”
- When possible, work as a team. Multiple minds, with different points of view, often are the best way to work through complex problems.

## Taking Phone Calls

Do not worry if you do not know the answer to a question. You are not alone! In the Colorado Master Gardener program, we do not expect you to know everything; we expect you to be able to *find* the answers.

- When you do not know the answer to the question or cannot find it quickly, tell the client “I don’t have that information right now” or “I am not finding the answer quickly. May I have your name and phone number or email so I can get back to you?”
- If you cannot find the information promised to a client by the appointed time, contact the client anyway to let them know you are working on it and have not forgotten about them. This is simply good customer service.
- Be an active listener and an active questioner.

- Smile when you talk as you will sound friendlier. You can “hear” a smile over the phone!
- Ask for help from your coordinator, horticulture specialist, or another Colorado Master Gardener.
- Avoid shaming statements that put people down or place blame like “you can’t do that!”

**Your confidence will grow with experience and time.**

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Authors: David Whiting, CSU Extension, retired. Revised April 2018 by Mary Small, CSU Extension, retired. Reviewed June 2023 by Merrill Kingsbury, CSU Extension.

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