

Master Gardeners

Written by Jeff Poppen
Tuesday, September 11, 2012

I love the people involved in the Master Gardeners Program. Their curiosity has led them to take courses in horticulture from State University professors, and to help out in community gardening projects. I've lectured to master gardeners in many of Middle Tennessee.

The extension agent opened up the meeting. They were planning a field trip to Lexington to visit the labs where diseases are identified. The information in the Master Gardeners educational material stems from research on chemicals in agriculture, funded by chemical companies.

Apparently the "Volunteer Gardener" TV show gets aired in Kentucky because they all knew me. I started out by asking for questions, and was still trying to answer them three hours later. These folks came to learn.

I explain botany, microbiology and chemistry in simple examples from the garden. How a plant grows and its interaction with microbes and nutrients is a fascinating subject. Illuminating the causes for phenomenon experienced in their own gardens was deeply satisfying for all of us.

Many took notes. One lady claimed afterward to have five pages of them. These folks were craving information on how to garden organically. There seems to be much confusion about chemicals, and concern over their safety. They said a field trip to my farm would be much more to their liking.

Soil structure differs widely, depending on how we treat our ground. I can feel soil and tell how it will grow plants. When it's soft and silky, colloidal and crumbly, and not stuck together in clods and clumps, plants will thrive.

We stepped outside to look at the four by four gardens enclosed in boards and mulched in between by wood chips. The soil was weary from chemical use, packed and crusty, dry and lifeless. I had to look elsewhere to show them what I was talking about.

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Underneath a nearby fence I dug out a clump of grass. Here we would see the beginnings of soil remediation. It was latticed with roots and had bugs and worms, but I could tell chemicals had been used.

It's a shame, but understandable, that chemical companies fund agriculture education. They make incredible amounts of money in return for their investment. It's an honor to be able to teach a more natural approach to gardening, and a hopeful sign that people are so eager to learn and pursue it. The extension agent agreed with much of my talk, gave me a hat and made me an honorary extension agent for the University of Kentucky. But don't tell Monsanto.