**JOHNSON**

This is Getting Dirty in Your Garden brought to you by NC State Extension Master Gardener Volunteers.  I’m your host, Harold Johnson, and I’m a Master Gardener in Durham County.

A new day for Durham County Extension and the Extension Master Gardener Volunteer program arrived the first of November, 2015. We welcomed Cheralyn Schmidt as the new Extension Horticulture Specialist.

I had the honor and pleasure to experience the most enthusiastic interview with Cheralyn. Interviews I've conducted for Getting Dirty with Master Gardeners, now Getting Dirty in Your Garden, have been lively but Cheralyn added a new level of excitement as we talked about the Master Gardener program.

Please enjoy learning more about our enthusiastic Extension Master Gardener Volunteer leader I as talk with Cheralyn.

I’ve got to find out how you jumped from the climate in Arizona to a four season, not harsh winters, beautiful growing climate. How did that happen?

SCHMIDT

Well, I researched this area for quite a while before I moved out here. I wanted to live some place where there is a lot of rain, mainly because it is easier to grow food and grow plants where there’s rain. Also, it’s very expensive to grow food in Arizona because there is very little rainfall, and it’s becoming dryer and dryer and the population is getting larger and larger—LARGER and LARGER. So I thought while I still had the energy to do so, I would make the big jump to create a life in a place where rain falls from the sky regularly. I call it “free money” falling from the sky! [Laughter] My water bill was like $5 last month; it was just joyous for me! I am very excited to be here and be able to work for the cooperative extension in Durham County.

JOHNSON  
Well on behalf of all the folks in the Durham County Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program—we’ve got to make sure we get “Extension Master Gardener Volunteer”, welcome!

SCHMIDT  
Thank you!

JOHNSON  
You got involved from the nutrition side in horticulture, I believe?  
  
  
SCHMIDT  
Yes, in Arizona, I specialized in seed-to-table food education. That was through two different programs. One was called “Tucson Village Farm” where we built a children’s farm with kids. It was built for and by kids to teach them about their food sources, farm safety, agriculture and nutrition, culinary skills—a lot of different skills—directly applied food skill for kids. Then I moved to the south side of Tucson for Cooperative Extension and opened the Garden Kitchen, which is a culinary and gardening school for families. We still saw children, but in the context of the family. We had a big demo-production garden. We did big cooking and gardening shows every weekend. It was truly seed-to-table. If we were teaching people about bees, then we would have a honey-sweetened whole grain desserts class. If we were showing people how to grow mushrooms, the cooking class would surround mushrooms and different mushroom recipes. We would do whole grains in the garden. We grew a little thing of grains and we would make bread in the kitchen. It really was a seed-to-table experience, so people were truly connected with their food sources.  
  
JOHNSON

You surely had to import the mushrooms! I can’t picture mushrooms growing well in Arizona!

SCHMIDT

Well, if you grow them under a shrub and you water them, mushrooms do very well. I grew them in my backyard, yes definitely!

JOHNSON

Water, water, water—that’s the key out there...

SCHMIDT

Water, water, water—yep, and that was really the key to me moving here, yes.

JOHNSON  
It’s becoming scarcer.

SCHMIDT  
Scarcer and scarcer—very expensive and very scarce, and because it is so sunny and gorgeous out there, at least during the winter time, that’s why everybody wants to live in the Southwest because it is about 360 days of sunshine a year. It is just gorgeous in the wintertime. If you have allergies, it is just heaven to live out there because the lack of water means that there are very few pests, very few molds, pollen, blight of any kind. Because of the lack of water in the air, so the ambient humidity is very low. That is good for people who have allergies, so it is a healthy place to live in that context.

JOHNSON  
Well, we are going to introduce you to some pests and diseases!  
  
  
SCHMIDT  
I’m excited! I just visited the Plant, Disease and Insect Clinic on campus and loved it! And I am very excited to work with them.  
  
JOHNSON  
It’s an entirely new learning experience and a new vocabulary.

SCHMIDT  
Completely! I just learned about the canker worm last week!

JOHNSON

Aha! I noticed the trees as I drove down here that had been banded to prevent the canker worm from getting back up into the upper story of the trees.

SCHMIDT

Um hmm…um hmm

JOHNSON

We have a radio program. I suspect you heard that before you ever moved here?

SCHMIDT

Yes! Yes, I heard your radio program. Quite a while back, I’ve been listening.

JOHNSON

We think it’s a bit unique because we have an all-volunteer group producing, editing, interviewing—we’re quite proud of it. Can that help you as you think about seed-to-table?

SCHMIDT

Of course!

JOHNSON

…carrying on.

SCHMIDT

Yes, I think a radio show pod cast is fantastic medium because it’s not just a radio show that comes on at a particular time. Because of the internet, you can listen to archived things for a very long time. Getting the word out about events and also nutritional information, current seasonal foods, ways that you can use different kinds of foods, a lot of people end up with a ton of okra—what do you do with that? Eggplant is another mystery to people.

JOHNSON

Zucchini squash

SCHMIDT

Zucchini, zucchini, zucchini, oh yes! That’s something I have a ton of experience in, so if you ever want to do a radio show on bumper crops from the garden in the summer, the wintertime—how do you repurpose all those lettuces that you are getting, and right now for all of our broccolis and cauliflowers and all of those brassicas; I would be delighted to help you with content for the radio show, as well as getting the word out for events, or anything you would need.

JOHNSON

[It will be] a little shift for you from struggling to get things that grow well and are plentiful to here. We frequently have bumper crops of all of the common vegetable garden plants. That will give you a little different challenge.

SCHMIDT

Yes.

JOHNSON

Briggs Avenue Garden—you’re familiar with that?

SCHMIDT

I am familiar with that.

JOHNSON

There’s an attempt to get more involvement in the community in growing their own food.

SCHMIDT

Yes! Most definitely! I really like that Durham Tech students are involved with that project. In my last life in working in Arizona, we had 16 master gardeners as part of the Garden Kitchen Demonstration Garden team. We also had about between 60 and 65 new student volunteers every semester. So it is great to pair up those two teams of volunteers because master gardeners have expertise and wisdom and young people often have absolutely no experience at all. However, they are willing and able to do big jobs and really have a lot of inspiration that they want to change the world. You can really harness that energy. Pairing the teams together was really like a perfect mix!

JOHNSON

And not to mention they have strong backs and good muscles!

SCHMIDT

That’s right—strong backs and good muscles! And they can work all day with a smile on their faces. I like that!

JOHNSON

Thinking about your experience—what’s one of the first things that you would like to bring to the Durham County Master Gardener Volunteer Program? Is it a similar Seed-to-Table program that you did in Arizona? What is one of the first things you want to introduce that is uniquely Cherlyn?

SCHMIDT

You know, what I’ve been doing the last couple of weeks, really, because I’ve only been on the job—this is my third week—is doing sort of an informal needs assessment because I have a lot of skills and a lot of interests. Rather than stepping in with the idea that there should be one way to do things, what I like to do is open my heart and mind and listen to all of the needs and desires of the volunteers of this team now, also listening to the desires and requirements of the leadership of the university, of the county, and also the desire of the public. What do they need from us? And then, through that, we can develop programming because there is really no need to develop aspects of programming that the public doesn’t desire. There’s no need to—even if there is a desire from the public for something—if master gardeners or volunteers in general are not interested in doing it, there is no reason to impose that on anyone. Volunteers offer their time and energy for different reasons, at different points in their life cycle. Master Gardeners, in particular, they, a lot of times, have been leaders of industry, leaders of health care—powerhouses in general in their working lives, and then either, during their working lives or when they retire, they decide to join the master gardeners. Over the past couple of weeks—since this is the beginning of my third week—I have been assessing what the master gardeners like to do. What they are inspired by? What the public would like to see, also what’s required by our leadership at the university and county level and through that, I will be able to determine what will be the best course of action for new programming, strengthening and funding needed for existing programing, because there is no real reason for me to come in with a prescribed idea of what I’m going to do for the program or how I see it going; it’s more how I can serve the public, the leadership at the university and mostly the master gardeners. Whether that’s funding for new projects, funding for existing projects that master gardeners—that they need support—any kind of liaising services with the leadership of the university and the county--whatever the master gardeners need--is my priority.

JOHNSON

You find that the folks involved in the Durham County—just like I am sure every other master gardener program—have careers that run a spectrum from physicians, we have retired executives, we have retired secretaries, we have the entire spectrum.

SCHMIDT

Um huh!

JOHNSON

And you are right! They all bring different skills and different interests and when you tap into an interest with the skill, now you have a ready volunteer—you have someone who will do great work!

SCHMIDT

Yes! Because working with volunteers is very different than working with paid staff. Working with volunteers—they are there because they want to be there. They are here because they want to serve; they want to learn something new. They want to offer their energy and passion towards something that interests them. Creating a space to support them in doing that so that they stay motivated, inspired and interested is really a priority for me—a priority area—because disinterested people don’t stick around. And I want the Master Gardener program to flourish and grow. Last year was the first class that we had that had more applicants than spaces and I would like that to continue! That is a big part of why I am here.

JOHNSON

Is there a hobby of some kind or do you busy yourself entirely with this horticulture?

SCHMIDT

Well the truth is food is my life—food and plants, really. I can cook anything. I enjoy very much traveling to foreign places, especially where English is not spoken and cooking in kitchens with women with their cultural heritage, especially. I’ve done a lot of that in Mexico. I would like to travel throughout Latin America, Spain, Europe, in general, and just cook and learn their food ways. So that’s a big hobby of mine. Here at home, I love chickens, I love bees and that’s everything from rearing them to harvesting them—the whole deal, the whole ball of wax. I do enjoy or I am inspired by looking at parts of the food system and learning pioneer skills that maybe are dying out—things like rendering of lard, butchering of animals, you know—the less institutional kinds of things that are kind of basic life skills. There’s a joke among my friends that if the Zombie Apocalypse ever hits, they are going to come to my house because I’ll have the garden and the eggs and I’ll be able to butcher the chickens for meat—so it’s a joke! I also make my own soap—gourmet, beautiful soaps. These kinds of skills interest me. I am not a purist—it’s not as if I have to have all of my food grown in my backyard—not at all. It’s just one of those things that interest me. Nowadays, I have the choice to do pretty much whatever I want for a career and live my life as I choose. But a hundred years ago, you had to render your own lard and make your own soap and do all of those things. You didn’t have a choice. If you wanted those things you had to create them yourself. There’s something about that rugged individualism that I appreciate.

JOHNSON

I see some opportunities in the future for this master gardener program. You find that in our area we seem to have fairly active farmer’s markets popped up all over everywhere in the triangle area. There are some folks who are making their own soaps and they’re almost living off the land, as you say. There are some folks in the farmer’s market that I attend that harvest their mushrooms wild, as well as grow mushrooms. So there’s something here of interest for you!

SCHMIDT

Most definitely! I think that’s because there is so much water here that it is sustainable for people. They can actually sustain themselves off of the land. Using that term “sustainable” it’s a very nebulous term—for some people it is sort of a bad word. But really, the literal meaning of sustainable is “can you live off of it; can it sustain you”. Just being in this state is a more sustainable situation for a lot of people—myself, included. For farmers, when rain falls from the sky and is able to keep things alive—your soils are more alive, which grows more things on the soils, which feeds more animals, humans included. Not only do you have more farms here, but you also have a growing population that can afford artisanal products. That’s another thing you’ve got! You’ve got some social justice around food. Where you’ve got farmers that will grow for an artisanal market and make a premium on some of their fruits and vegetables and farm products and then they are able to offer other programs—lower income programs—food at a discounted rate. You get the full spectrum of “foodie” all the way to “social justice” through food. That’s why I love Durham!

JOHNSON

I go to a farmer’s market in Chapel Hill and there is an organization that accepts donations of cash or at the end of the farmer’s market, farmers can turn over unsold produce that they don’t see a need for, before it spoils. They distribute pounds and pounds of food to the organizations that then distribute it to those that need it.

SCHMIDT

That’s a great example of just that point! Also, I know that at Brigg’s Avenue Garden, they’ve got the Durham Tech students that come and volunteer at the garden, but they also dedicate some of their plots to growing food for the food bank—they actually have a food bank within the Durham Tech Community College. That’s fantastic! Actually, I have an appointment at 11:30 to visit it today and go and see the “madness” of the food bank. Food banks often only get commodity foods. Commodity foods, while supportive and they keep people alive; they are not the healthiest calories available, so supplementing those with fruits and vegetables that are locally grown right down the street. That’s very beneficial for the students to see that.

JOHNSON

You know, at Chapel Hill, I believe that faculty and staff have their own community garden and that provides fresh vegetables for the hourly employees of the university that don’t have the time, the space, the resources to grow their own food—great program!

SCHMIDT

That is a great program!

JOHNSON

I’ve been meaning to go interview the folks about it.

SCHMIDT

Okay! You know it seems for this radio show, there is so much going on in the triangle area, you will have content forever!

JOHNSON

There is no end to the programs we can provide the public to help them know what is available that’s not readily visible to the general public. We can tap into resources that would ***never*** get to the public because they are in academia, that we see a way to see to translate what they’ve been doing, what they’ve learned into English—common English.

SCHMIDT

Yes! A digestible package!

JOHNSON

We see that we are in the triangle of information, at least the Triangle-Piedmont area of North Carolina, if not more of North Carolina. We even have people who go to our website and then podcast something and they’re from, maybe even Arizona!

SCHMIDT

Yes! Well, I listened to you when I was in Arizona, so I know that happens there! [Laughter].

JOHNSON

Well, come on, I think it doesn’t matter! You simply go to the website!

SCHMIDT

Right! Anytime you want! Right! I love it! I love it! The first time I heard it, I laughed so hard! You know, we were talking about this in another meeting, like “Facebook”, “McDonald’s”, “Lift”, “Uber”--it’s very simple names with very few syllables. It’s usually one little emblem that’s not very complicated like “Twitter”. It’s very simple words. One thing represents so much. My master’s is in public health. We had to write tons of papers. Also my programming was in public health. A lot of my funding was public health. Some of the paperwork they would give us—like “here’s the lesson you’re going to teach” and you would look at it think “this is not translatable”! The name of the program is like fifteen words long with thirty syllables. This is over everybody’s heads, you know! In general, on average, [for] the general public most information is put out at a fourth or fifth grade reading level. That means that most people can understand it. Often, I am really glad that I’m part of extension because I am the public, but I also have interacted with the “Ivory Towers” now, so much, going through education, that it’s nice for me to be able to translate and see when something comes down from leadership that says “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do.” And I think “Oh gosh, how are we going to make this work, how are we going to package it, how are we going to make it “sexy”? How are we going to make this stick in people’s minds?” I just love the name of the radio show!

JOHNSON

I am drawn to your enthusiasm, your energy! If you just bring that, you will sweep us all up and you will get more volunteers doing more things because of your catchy energy!

SCHMIDT

Well, thank you! As a little side note, my predecessor had been working together with Chris Apple and Michelle Wallace to start a kids’ program—a children’s program for master gardeners going out to schools and things like that. Listen for that—which is good. Chris put out an email and she had eight or nine of the master gardeners volunteer. When everybody gets together for a meeting in January, we’re going to go to the drawing board and find out what kind of groups they would like to work with. Those kinds of things are really exciting!

JOHNSON

Each of the major gardens: the Botanical Garden, Arboretum, or Duke Garden have the children’s coordinator.

SCHMIDT

Um huh.

JOHNSON

Well, I see a way to partner with them, because they already have a somewhat funded program. They’ve got a dedicated person and if we brought some resources to them, they’ve got to be excited. They are also doing some things that we could bring to some of our volunteers to help them. There are so many opportunities to work with others in this community.

SCHMIDT

Yeah!

JOHNSON

I love the fact that you are going to try to identify: “What does the public need?”; “What do the master gardeners need?”; “What does the state need?”

SCHMIDT

What do they want to do? Yeah! And what do the bosses want? Right! Exactly!

JOHNSON

And we’ll go from there!

SCHMIDT

Yes!

JOHNSON

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