

Final Report to the Elvenia J. Slosson Endowment

Online Resource for Tracking Home Gardener Questions and Answers/ Follow Up for Master Gardener Help Lines

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Introduction:

The goal of the Online Master Gardener Helpline Resource, re-named the Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) System is to aid Master Gardeners and their clientele by tracking and cataloging incoming questions, providing certified answers (i.e., answers that have been reviewed by UC staff/advisors or selected Master Gardeners), and sorting the questions into a searchable database. In addition, this system allows for tracking client contact information within the counties for follow-up by other Master Gardeners. While it is not a diagnostic system, this program allows for photos to be uploaded to aid in the diagnostic process. The specific objectives of this proposal are 1) to expand the new system we have developed by adding to the number of questions and “certified answers” in the database, 2) to increase the robustness and usability of the new system, 3) to develop user documentation, and 4) to provide training to Master Gardeners on how to use this online resource.

In 2008, there were more than 4,100 Master Gardeners in California answering more than 500,000 questions from the general public on home horticulture topics. These data were compiled from the Volunteer Management System 2.0 (VMS 2.0) by the Statewide Master Gardener Office. Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help to extend UC research-based information and knowledge to home gardeners. One of the most important jobs they do is to respond to the many home gardening questions, calls, and emails that come into the UCCE county offices. The purpose of this proposal is to more fully develop the online Question and Answer resource we have built to aid Master Gardeners in tracking and cataloging the incoming horticulture questions and in providing certified answers (i.e., answers that have been reviewed by UC staff/advisors or selected Master Gardeners). These questions will then be sorted into a searchable database. Ultimately, these questions, with the certified answers, will be available to the general public and also downloaded into the national eXtension FAQ system.

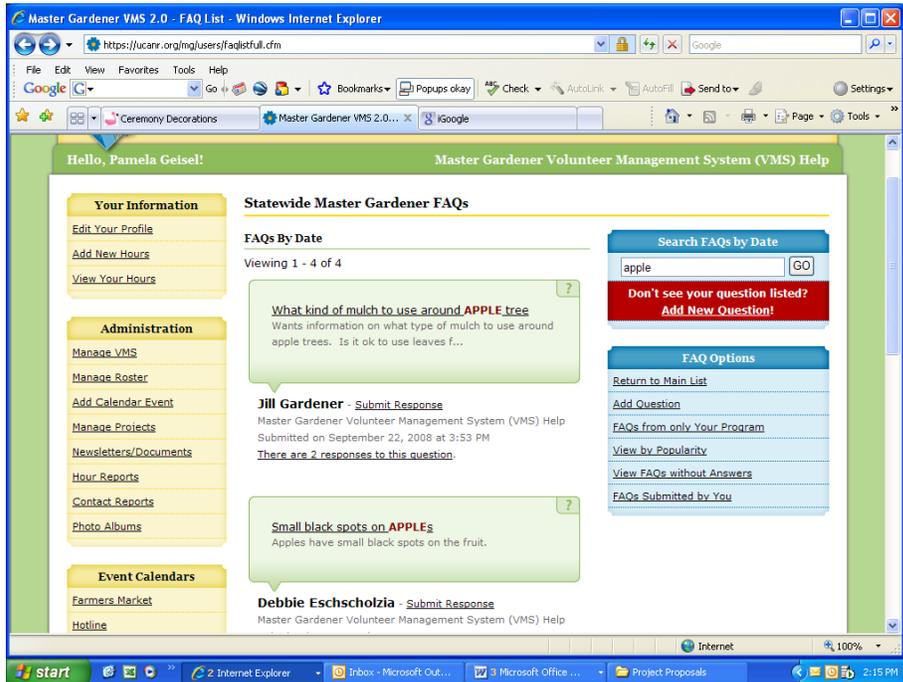
Objectives:

- ❁ Complete usability testing of the current system and make necessary modifications as required.
- ❁ Develop user documentation and “help” for system navigation and use.
- ❁ Increase the number of base questions and answers currently in the system so that it is immediately usable and robust upon launch.
- ❁ Develop a core group of UC staff/advisors or selected Master Gardeners who have the expertise and knowledge to become “certifiers” for the answers in the Q&A system.
- ❁ Train Master Gardeners on how to use the system most effectively and efficiently.
- ❁ Create a centralized database for all questions. In this system, questions from one county are not viewed by other Master Gardener counties. However, once questions have certified answers, they will be downloaded to a centralized database and posted on the California Gardening Web site where they can be sorted by topic, region, or commodity

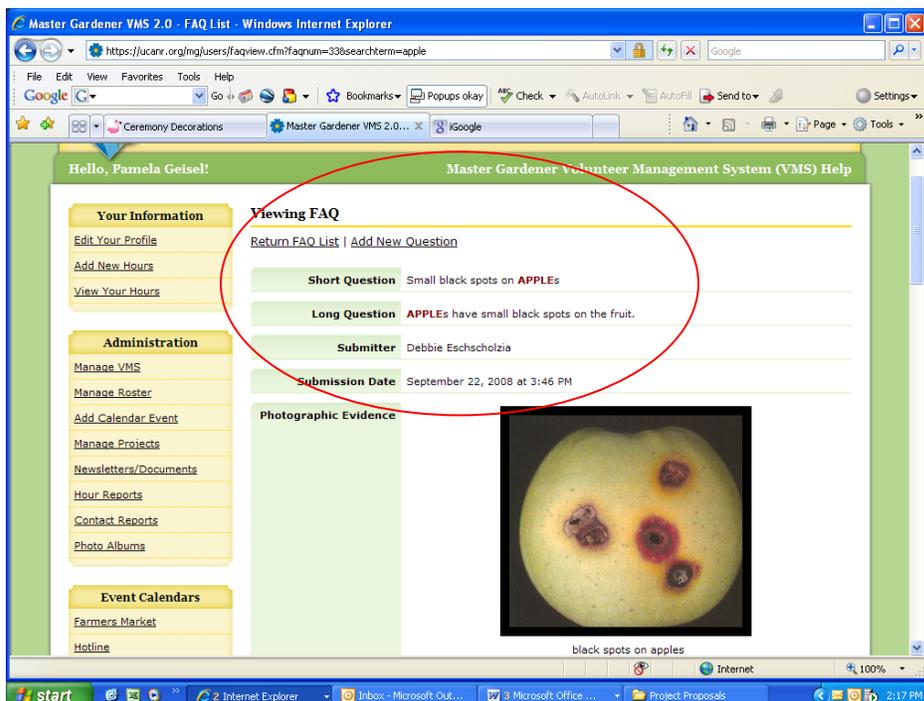
Following is the access/opening page to the Q&A system that is part of VMS 2.0. Master Gardeners start with the search menu.

The screenshot shows the UCCE Master Gardener Volunteer Management System (VMS) 2.0 home page. The page is displayed in Internet Explorer. The header includes the UCCE logo and "UCCE MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM 2.0". The user is logged in as Pamela Geisel. The main content area is divided into several sections: "Your Information" with links for profile, hours, and view hours; "Administration" with links for VMS, roster, calendar, projects, newsletters, reports, and photo albums; "Welcome!" with a message and contact info; "Latest Statewide News" with a post about food safety; "Your Hours" showing 1,686 volunteer hours and 23 continuing education hours; "Search FAQs" with a search box and "GO" button; "Add or View FAQs" with links for adding questions and viewing answers; and "Links" with links to the statewide site, ANR media library, and Butte County program. A red circle highlights the "Search FAQs" section.

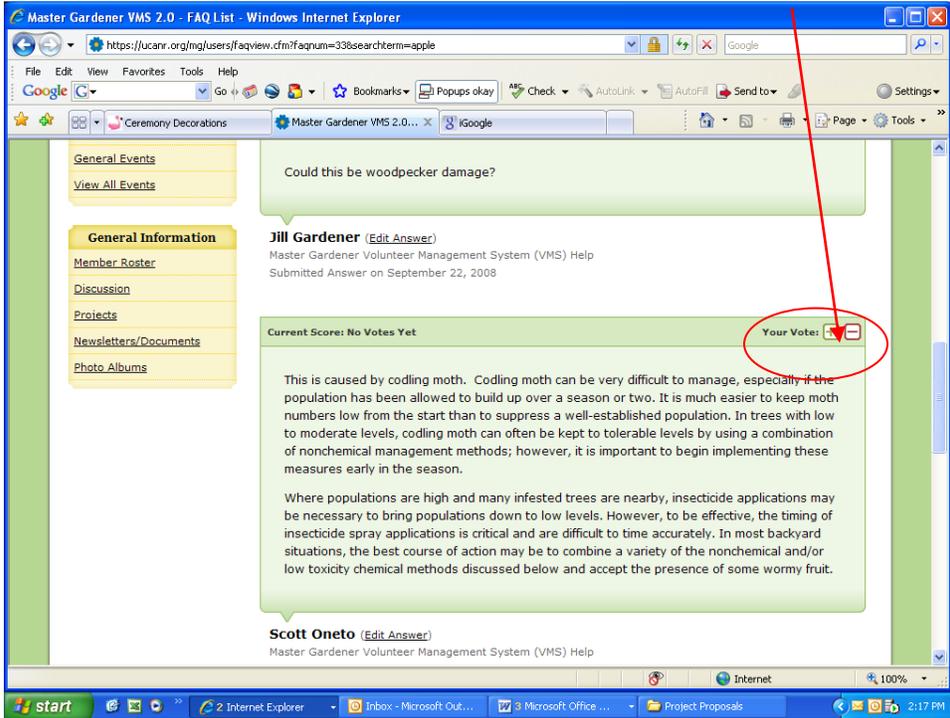
This next page shows the search results for "apple." There are four questions that have the key word "apple(s)" in the text.



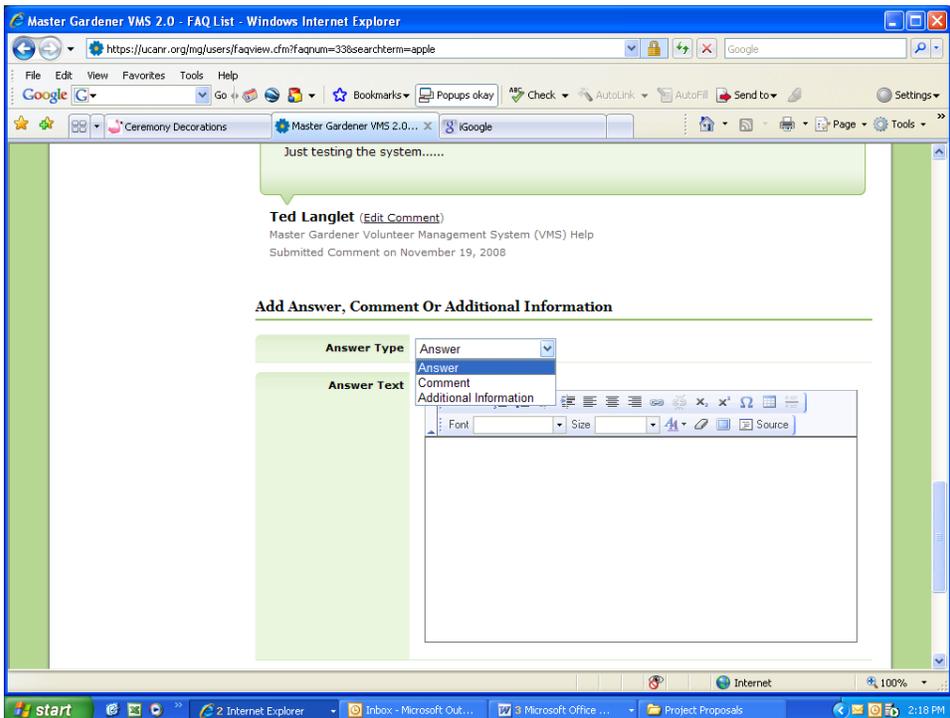
The following page shows the details and the longer question, along with the picture, if uploaded, and the contact details from the client.



This page shows the answers that have been submitted by other users of the system. None have been “certified” yet; however, individuals can “vote” for their favorite answer.



The following page shows the area in which a person may answer, add a comment, or provide additional information. Answers may only be edited by the individual that submits them. However, the certified answer always moves to the top of the page.



Discussion:

The Statewide Master Gardener Program contracted with ANR Communication Services computer staff (the Web Action Team) to build the FAQ system. We have conducted two usability tests. Access to this FAQ system is through the password-protected VMS 2.0, which the volunteers currently use to log individual volunteer hours, access their newsletters, and sign up for calendared events and projects. Their annual recertification is also being done online in a few counties. This Q&A system will be another important component of this online tool.

Currently, the FAQ system allows questions to be searched, added, and answered. It allows answers to be ranked (ranking and certifying the correctness of the answer) and questions and answers can be sorted in several ways, such as by topic, key word, most recent, unanswered, program, category, popularity, top submitters, etc. The system also allows contact information, site information, and specifics of a particular problem to be stored within the county-specific system. This makes it possible to follow up with clients with the correct answer.

The FAQ system has a series of training videos to cover many functions of the system. The videos include: FAQ Training, Searching the FAQs, Adding a New Question, FAQ Search Options and Filters, Types Answers and Text Editor Toolbar.

- Increase awareness of Master Gardener programs in California.
- Increase expertise of California Master Gardeners and home garden clientele.
- Engage Master Gardener volunteers in researching problems and extending the knowledge and information gained to clientele.
- Increase Master Gardener activity by allowing volunteers to be active from their residence.
- Extend research-based information to a larger clientele base.
- Allow collaboration with other programs throughout the United States in extending research-based information.
- Build partnerships among UC volunteers, staff, faculty, specialists, and clientele.
- Educate the public on sound horticultural practices.
- Emphasize integrated pest management practices in dealing with pests and diseases.
- Serve as a centralized datastore for answering horticultural questions statewide.
- Facilitate and communicate knowledge about sustainable home horticulture practices.
- Have worldwide presence on the Web, providing sound horticultural practices.