



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2022.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Loudoun County

Program Title: VCE Loudoun Master Gardener Virtual Help Desk

Program Category: Organization Development

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Monica Spells

Title: Assistant County Administrator

Signature: 

**VCE Loudoun Master Gardener Virtual Help Desk  
VACo 2022 Nomination: Organization Development**

**Overview of Program:**

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Loudoun developed an online platform and virtual delivery of customer service to continue the traditional in-person Help Desk services during the pandemic when in-person activity was halted across the country. The virtual delivery of the existing program enabled VCE Loudoun to support residents and communities with horticulture questions uninterrupted by the temporary closure of offices during the pandemic. Master Gardeners are an extension of VCE Loudoun staff and with their outreach they are able to reach hundreds of residents annually with research and scientific-based responses to plant, soil, water, insect, and other horticulture issues as they are happening real-time. At no cost to the county, the VCE Loudoun Virtual Help Desk is staffed by Master Gardener volunteers using their own computers and databases housed within the online drive. The development of the innovative virtual process also kept volunteers safe from close contact with clients. The process has been so successful with staff, volunteers and clients, that it continues to run today.

**Need for the Program/Challenge:**

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the VCE Loudoun Master Gardener in-person Help Desk was forced to close to the public. The pandemic wasn't going to stop plant and insect questions during the growing season, so it was essential to devise and implement a virtual platform and process to assist the community with inquiries. An extensive training manual, processes and online resources were developed for the volunteers to follow to provide uninterrupted service and horticulture support to the clientele of Loudoun County.

## **How Program Was Carried Out:**

Database for resources initialized: It was essential to have all the research materials available online for the volunteers to use and in one place. A significant amount of effort was put into establishing the shared resources and an online information architecture that enabled Help Desk volunteers to find useful information to relay to the client. The shared resources provide online access to forms, training materials and other information that support a broad range of horticulture and natural resources inquiries. The database contains over 50 folders of resources by topic (example: annuals, insects, trees, weeds, vegetables, etc.) for researching. Within each folder, there are publications from land grant universities and scientific institutions to assist with the research to answer the client's particular question.

Detailed process manual: To assure the success of our online service delivery model, it was also essential to have a process for all Help Desk volunteers to follow in order to access the client emails in a timely manner, research, answer the client, and record the transaction. A Help Desk manual was developed for all volunteers to use and reference. Step-by-step instructions and diagrams are included in the manual for ease of use by the volunteer. There are 14 chapters with details. Having this manual as a reference ensures the same process is followed for all users and provides volunteers with the guidance needed to effectively serve the public.

Data tracking/reporting: Forms were created to track all the information from the client in terms of what they were asking, and answers back to the client with the remediation. Help Desk volunteers document the topics of each inquiry, as well as the information and resources utilized to resolve inquiries, which creates an every-growing database of responses that can be leveraged in the future when like inquiries are received. Using these input forms allows for consistent reporting of topic, publications used, answer given and duration of activity.

Dedicated Online Communications: To facilitate online communications for the convenience of VCE Loudoun clients, an online communication channel was established that eliminated the need for residents with horticulture questions to seek assistance in-person or by phone. A dedicated email was activated for all volunteers to log into the system to view the email questions and requests. The process created efficiencies in the administration of the virtual program and provides clients with a common customer experience regardless of the volunteer who responds to the inquiry. The volunteer logs into the system and chooses an email to review and respond to directly. Folders within the email client allow the volunteer to pull that email over and put it into a folder with their name on it. This way no one else can log in and answer the question at the same time. The individual does all the research necessary to answer the client and replies to the client with the email from the dedicated address.

Training of volunteers: Training was done via a zoom during the pandemic as in-person events were not an option. The in-depth training was created to walk the volunteers through the entire process to become familiar with the process and reporting structure. In-person training is now available to those comfortable. The training could take one to two hours.

Client instruction: The client instructions for seeking horticulture or natural resource assistance from VCE Loudoun is available on the organization's website (<https://www.loudoun.gov/106/Virginia-Cooperative-Extension---Loudoun>, click on Master Gardener icon, then Help Desk). Clear instructions on what is needed from the client are there as well as details on what photos to take and attach to the email. This ensures the client submits all of the information needed for prompt and accurate responses to their inquiries.

**Cost of the Program:**

No costs to the county are associated with this program. Trained volunteers access the platform remotely via the internet.

**Results/Success of the Program:**

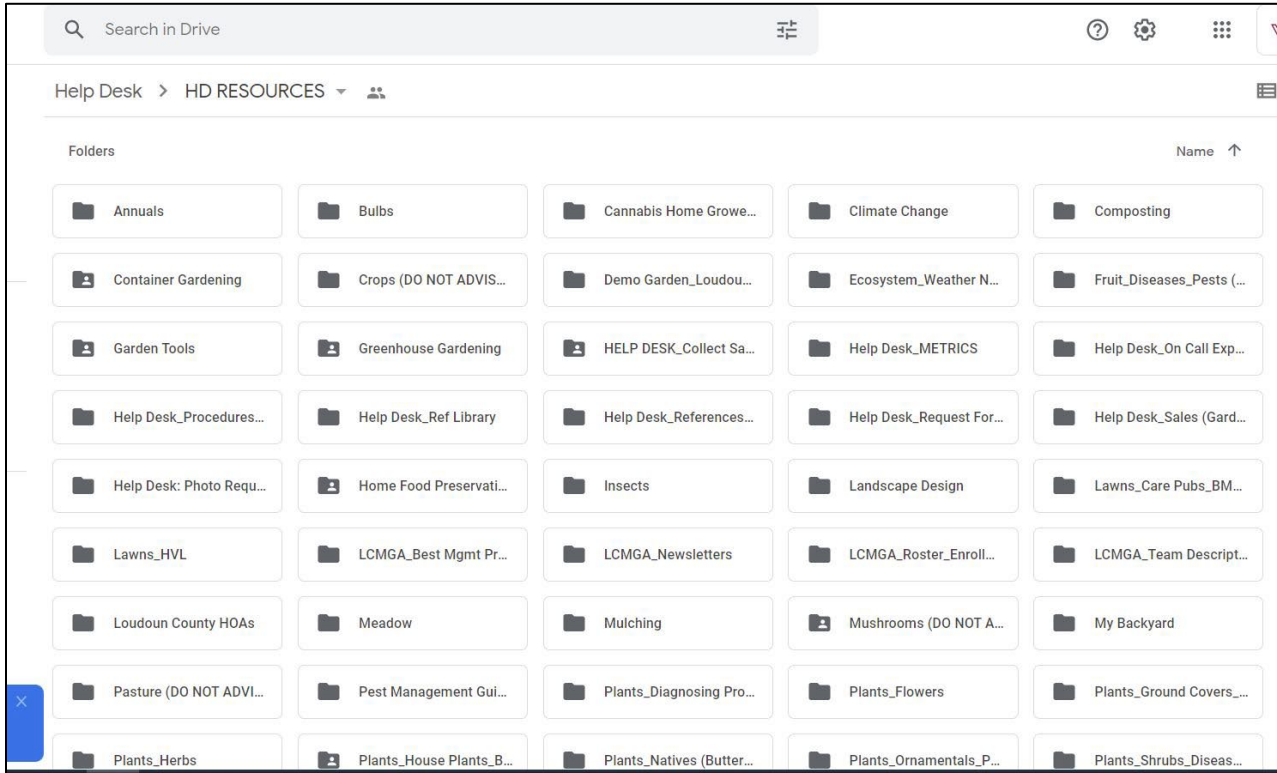
Since 2020 when the pandemic shut down the walk-in service for the community, the VCE Loudoun Master Gardener Virtual Help Desk has assisted over 1,000 clients with plant identification, fruit and vegetable growing advice, lawn care, tree care, plant disease and insect identification, and best management practices for remediation. The volunteers remain safe, and the clients continue to get real-time answers from the luxury of their own homes. Due to the popularity of the program, VCE Loudoun continues to offer the virtual service post-pandemic.

**Award Criteria:**

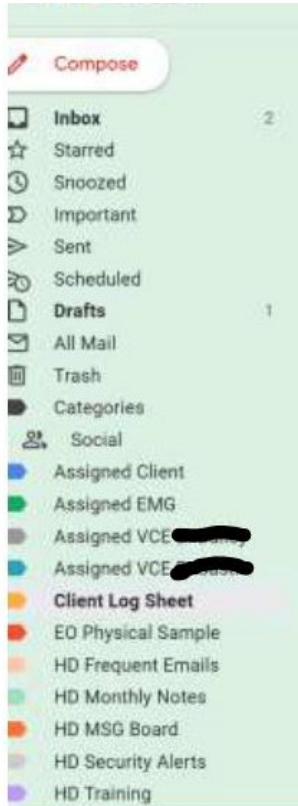
- The Virtual Help Desk program offers an innovative “touchless” way to reach Loudoun County residents and property owners or managers, without any service fee.
- It expands the scope of community outreach education for the County, as the Master Gardeners assist in best management practices that contribute to natural resource conservation as well as optimum growing conditions.
- This innovative program links trained volunteers with the needs of the community and could serve as a model for other jurisdictions for any type of virtual customer service program.

## Supplemental Materials


Drive with resources:



Dedicated Email with Folders:





## Process Manual - Table of Contents:

 <b>HELP DESK: QUICK START USER'S GUIDE</b>	
<b>Table of Contents</b>	
1. New Volunteer: Create HD Gmail Account on your Home Computer	2
2. Log-in to the Help Desk Shared Google Account	3
3. HD Gmail - Pick up a Client Email from INBOX to Answer	4
4. Assign your own Name Label to the email you want to Answer	5
5. HD Research Options	6
6. When to Assign to Client or Assign to Expert	11
7. When to Label an EO Physical Sample	12
8. Send the Client the HD Response	13
9. Fill in the Client Log Sheet (CLS) using Google Form	14
10. Save Client Photos with your Diagnosis	16
11. Delete the Client request from the INBOX	18
12. Track Volunteer Hours in Better Impact	18
13. Need Additional HD Training?	19
14. Need Additional Help?	20


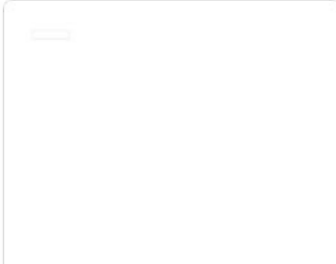
## Database/Forms:


Help Desk > HD Forms ▾

Folders

-  Diagnostic Worksheet\_...
-  Jot Form Backups

Files

-  EMG Help Desk Client Log Sheet  
Lynchburg County Extension Master Gardeners Volunteers  
Please use all fields. Help desk for any questions.  
Natchezville, VA 22861-1000 | 540-717-7863  
- Request -  
Date the request or email arrived at the Help Desk \* :  
MM / DD / YYYY  
/ / 2020  
Vendor \*  
None  
HD Volunteer Name \*
-  EMG\_CLS Google Form...

EMG\_CLS Google Form... 

Overview of Statistics:

