

Goochland-Powhatan Master Gardener Residential Site Visits

by Rebecca Crutchfield Crow, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer



Back in the day, I would answer the Help Desk phone at our Powhatan Extension Office and show our interns the process for documenting incoming calls on paper. Once in a blue moon, someone would come in with a plant or insect sample. That was all. It was pretty boring working behind that desk.

Then, four years ago, I got the idea to do residential site visits where I could take the interns out to see homeowners' yards. This gave the interns a chance to learn plant identification in the field with me and to see plants growing in various seasons. Homeowners always ask wide-ranging questions about plant id, managing invasives, discouraging browsing deer, and caring for lawns. They also often want information about plant maintenance and landscaping. Consequently, the interns heard a variety of those concerns as well as the answers to all those questions.

Today, we typically do around 25 site visits a year over an eight-month period. Site

visits are tracked on a spreadsheet, and homeowners can call or email the Help Desk directly to schedule one. They are advertised on our GPMGA website and Facebook, at Farmers' Markets and at Spring Garden Fest (our yearly fundraiser event), and by word of mouth. Every year our new interns are invited on site visits as a way to earn Service Hours, to learn something new and/or share what they know, and to help the community, all while having FUN.

As I look over my site visit records, there have been several standouts. A homeowner who had just moved to Goochland from out of state called needing help with plant identification. I took several interns with me to her lovely, landscaped yard, and she was so impressed with our knowledge that she recommended us to a girlfriend. The second friend enjoyed her site visit so much that she recommended us to a third mutual friend, whom we visited later that week. Since they all were very interested in gardening, I suggested that they might enjoy our 10-class series called Gardening 101. All three ladies signed up and took the classes!

Another standout visit was with a gardener who was downsizing from her farm and moving out of Virginia. She wanted to take some of her prized peonies with her. At that time, I didn't know much about peonies, but I knew a local expert I could ask. I called him before scheduling her site visit, we had a very long discussion, and I took extensive notes. During our visit she wanted several other plants identified, and then we discussed what I had learned about her peonies. I gave her detailed written instructions on moving her peonies so she wouldn't have to remember them or write them down. She was so appreciative of my help that she generously asked if I would like to take some peonies home with me. We dug up some of her Festiva Maxima and others that were hot pink doubles (she didn't know the variety) and packed them in my car. When I got home, I planted them immediately in a sunny location. Every spring, when those beautiful fragrant peonies bloom, I think of her and our visit.

These are just a few of the many wonderful encounters I have had on site visits in Goochland and Powhatan Counties. While I still staff the Help Desk from home to answer routine gardening questions, I am always excited when I get a request for a site visit. My hope is that requests for site visits will continue to increase and that more of our Master Gardeners will be encouraged to lead them.