



Safety and Risk Management for Virginia Extension Master Gardeners

Adapted by Edward Olsen, Extension Master Gardener Program Director, School of Plant and Environmental Sciences, Virginia Tech

Introduction

Everything that Virginia Extension Master Gardeners do involves some sort of risk. It could be risk to their own health and safety, risk to the health and safety of participants in the programs they lead, risk to property (like those new pollinator plants they are planting), risk to natural resources, or risk to the reputation of the volunteers, chapters, program, Virginia Tech, Commonwealth of Virginia, and local partners with whom they are volunteering.

“Risk management” is the sum of all the strategies we use to try to reduce the likelihood that an action we take will cause harm. Risk management is the responsibility of every Virginia Extension Master Gardener (EMG).

In this publication, we describe the common categories of risk EMG volunteers may encounter as part of their learning and service in the program. We give examples of specific risks in each category, and we describe recommended strategies for EMG volunteers to follow. While this publication is not a comprehensive list of all possible risks, it should make volunteers aware of typical risks and guide their identification of and planning for the particular risks of their activities. At the end are several worksheets to help volunteers plan for and document risk management plans.

General Personal Protection



Image 1. High visibility clothing may be necessary personal protective equipment. Photo of man with high visibility hat 20241122-USDA-FNS-CDP-0270 via USDA. Your first responsibility is to keep yourself safe!

- Make sure that the activity is an approved one in your unit before participating. Identify under which project the activity is approved.
- Review the hazards and risks of the activity and prepare for them. Document your process (see Appendices I and II.)
- Work in pairs or a group, and avoid going into the field alone.
- Be prepared for the weather and environmental conditions that you will encounter. Pack and dress accordingly.

- Carry a cell phone, and stay aware of the closest place you can go to get help or make a call.
- Carry a first aid kit and any medications or equipment that you require.
- Share your emergency contact information with others.
- Know your own abilities and what the activity requires. Make sure it is the right fit for you.
- Take periodic breaks and do not exhaust yourself.
- Drink before you feel thirsty, eat before you feel hungry, and rest before you feel tired.
- Make sure you know how to use any tools or equipment for the activity.
- Ask for assistance if you need it.

Leadership



Image 2. EMG volunteers have a responsibility to provide program leadership. Group gardener photo 20230731-USDA-FNS-UNK-0036 via USDA.

As an EMG volunteer, you have a responsibility to provide program leadership while leading activities that could foreseeably harm people, whether they are other EMG volunteers or members of the public.

Some strategies you will want to use when leading activities for other people include:

- If there are multiple leaders or organizations involved, make sure it is clear who is responsible for what aspects of the program. Who is responsible for everyone's safety? Do not assume that another entity is responsible, particularly if no one from that entity is going to be present at the actual event.
- Use registration forms or check-in sheets to document who is in attendance. In some cases, you might want to collect emergency contact numbers for each participant.
- Communicate expectations to the participants ahead of time, including what to wear, what to bring, the difficulty level of the activity, and what skills or abilities are needed.
- Scout program locations ahead of time, noting potential hazards.
- Always provide clear instructions and safety reminders at the beginning of any program or activity.
- Waiver forms are an optional way to communicate expectations. They do not remove your duty of care responsibilities, however.
- Know what you'll do in an emergency.
- Carry a cell phone. If you are in an area without cell reception, know the nearest place you can go to make a call.
- If you may need to communicate in an area without cell reception, troubleshoot this with your local VCE office. Options for non-cellular communication include walkie-talkies, which may be on hand at your local VCE office.
- Communicate where you are hosting the event to your local VCE office and make sure your local VCE office is aware of your approved activities.
- Carry or have reasonable access to a first aid kit.
- Carry the VCE emergency procedures card and refer to it if an emergency arises. Printable copies of the card are at <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/490/490-101/490-101.html>.

Youth Interactions



Image 3. Interacting with youth presents unique risks. Youth project mage 09di1675-173 via USDA.

Leading activities for youth, defined as individuals under 18 years old, requires some special procedures. Many programs you may lead for youth will be organized and under the umbrella of another organization, such as perhaps your local Parks and Recreation department, a State Park, or a school. If this is the case, you will need to follow the guidelines of that organization in addition to what we are discussing here. Partnering with other organizations in this way is recommended, because their representatives may have the primary duty of care and may be able to assist with planning an age-appropriate program, behavior management, and other aspects of the activity outside of the environmental education content.

If you or your association is organizing a program or activity for youth yourself, not under the umbrella of another organization, then it is important to know that you need to work with Virginia Cooperative Extension's 4-H personnel to put on the program if it involves more than 6 contact hours with the same youths. Your local Virginia Cooperative Extension 4-H agent will be able to provide appropriate screening of any volunteers who will be supervising youth, assist you with recruitment and registration, provide training in working with youth, give you access to 4-H curriculum materials, and help you with planning risk management strategies. They are experts in youth programming and are a great asset for you.

EMGs that receive the 4H "Working with Youth" training from their 4H agent, can be identified in Better Impact to have received that training.

There are two specific policies you must always follow when providing youth programming, whether through 4-H or another organization:

- **Remain "Above Suspicion".** This policy is also called the "Rule of Threes." It is the idea that you should avoid adults being in a one-on-one situation with a child. The purpose is to provide a safe and caring environment for all program participants and to protect yourself from accusations of abuse. Stay in groups of three or more at all times. Before an activity, imagine how all phases of the activity will proceed and anticipate problems, such as a medical emergency, a parent being late to pick up their child, or even a child needing to go back to a building to use the restroom.
- **Be a mandatory reporter.** In Virginia, anyone involved in the education or care of children, including volunteers, has the responsibility to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect. Suspicion means a "reasonable cause to believe that an individual has been abused or neglected." There is a statewide, 24-hour hotline to call at 1-800-552-7096, and the report must be made within 24 hours. You should also report the suspicion to your local agent or coordinator in this time frame. Other than reporting to these entities, maintain confidentiality throughout the process.

Weather and Environmental Hazards



Image 4. Weather and environmental factors are risks you will encounter regularly. Storm photo Weather05 via USDA NRCS Montana.

Some of your work and programming as an EMG volunteer is done outdoors. Weather and environmental factors are risks that you will encounter regularly.

Some examples of these risks include:

- Hot temperatures and sun exposure, which can lead to dehydration and other heat emergencies;

- Cold temperatures, which can lead to hypothermia or frostbite;
- Weather events, such as ice, thunderstorms, high winds, and flooding;
- Terrain issues associated with the outdoors, such as uneven surfaces, steep terrain, tripping hazards, and slippery surfaces.

Strategies you will want to employ to minimize risks from these hazards include:

- Walk the trail or visit the site ahead of time to make sure you are familiar with it and to anticipate hazards.
- Wear clothing that is appropriate for the weather conditions and bring additional clothing, such as a rain jacket, for weather that might arise.
- Use sun protection, including sunscreen, long sleeves, hats, and sunglasses.
- Carry plenty of drinking water.
- Avoid prolonged physical exertion and/or exposure to extreme heat or cold.
- Allow time for breaks and rest.
- Monitor and be prepared for changing weather conditions.
- If you are leading other people in the activity, encourage them to use these same behaviors.

Contact with the Public



Image 5. Discussion between people. Image Jones_clearedsite via USDA NRCS Virginia photo by Barbara Bowen.

Even when you are not leading a public event, it's likely you will encounter other members of the public as you are doing your activity, especially if you are in a public area like a park. Plan ahead for these encounters; they are a chance for you to leave someone with an impression of the EMG program, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and the project you are doing. We want this impression to be positive.

Help ensure that the impression is a good one by following these strategies:

- Wear your VCE branded name tag that identifies you as a Virginia Extension Master Gardener volunteer
- Be aware of what entities you are representing, including the EMG program, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and local partner organizations.
- Be a good role model.
- Make good use of opportunities for informal educational contacts by being prepared to provide a brief and friendly explanation of what you are doing for members of the public who may be curious.
- Use appropriate behavior and language.
- Show respect for other people and property.

Location



Image 6. Different locations present new risks. School garden image 09di1675-02 via USDA.

When programming at a location other than the local extension office be sure you are following the rules for the site, whether it is federal, state, local, or private property.

- VCE strives to comply with applicable federal, state, and local rules and regulations pertaining to the openness of our programs and employment opportunities to all. The Americans with Disabilities Act precludes discrimination on the basis of disability status. In an effort to provide evidence of our good faith effort to comply with the aforementioned, it is encouraged that self-assessment forms be utilized, as appropriate. Your local agent or coordinator can access and provide the “ADA Self Assessment” form from the VCE Intranet.
- Help reduce the spread of invasive species. Check your clothing, shoes, and equipment for seeds, plant parts, and other organisms before leaving the site. A boot brush, duct tape, and extra water for rinsing can be helpful tools in this process.
- Follow “Leave No Trace” principles and guidelines to minimize impacts of your activities. See <https://lnt.org/research-resources/leave-no-trace-for-the-outdoor-workplace/> for examples.
- For stewardship projects make sure you understand and implement proper techniques for planting, tool use, trail creation, etc. Make sure you understand and demonstrate proper tool use.
- Volunteers may not apply pesticides (including herbicides) unless they are certified applicators, registered technicians or operating under the specific guidelines of state law. For further information, see VCE Pesticide Policy Statement, rev. 5/24, https://mastergardener.ext.vt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/VCE-Pesticide-Policy-Statement-93-001_revised2024.pdf.
- Volunteers are not authorized to sign any contracts on behalf of the Virginia Extension Master Gardener program or its sponsoring agencies. If you need a contract signed, please contact your local agent or coordinator. The most common contracts you likely will encounter are those for booking event spaces. Be sure to allow plenty of time, ideally at least six weeks, in case the contract requires some negotiation.
- Make sure you understand the civil rights responsibilities of EMG volunteers, such as making sure your programs are accessible and non-discriminatory. Use all reasonable efforts to invite and welcome a diverse group of participants. Use the non-discrimination statement when advertising programs (see https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_-qbKUwW8V8k8f0j0JRd2I4tcQzOc3Mr/view).
- Use the ADA statement when advertising events. Communicate with your local agent or coordinator when you are advertising programs, because they or the local office may need to be listed as the contact for ADA accommodation requests so that a work phone number can be provided. See <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oliLrMaOL5WYJextNGRMDrJKtQvsQfbG/view>.
- It is required that you obtain signed media releases when photographing or videotaping minors and people who are not EMG volunteers if you intend to publish the images online or in print. https://www.communications.cals.vt.edu/content/dam/communications_cals_vt_edu/resources/documents/2019%20Image%20and%20Interview%20Release.pdf.

Administrative Risks



Image 7. Volunteers can not sign contracts on behalf of the VCE Master Gardener Program. Photo of Extension employee with client image 20240418-FPAC-CW-0012 via USDA/Christopher Willis.

- If participating in an approved citizen science project, follow citizen science protocols. Understand the protocols before collecting data. Make sure to follow directions on what to record, how to record it, and where to share the data. Make sure you understand and demonstrate the correct use of any equipment.
- Stick to research-based information. For education projects, including tabling at events, be sure you are sharing only sound, research-based information and recommendations. Information from VCE is the best place to start. Your local agent or coordinator can direct you to other appropriate resources in necessary.
- Be aware how advice or identification help you provide may be used by the recipient. Use publications from VCE to support your statements, and refer people to professionals when needed.

- Follow copyright laws. When creating educational or marketing materials such as presentations and displays, be sure you have permission to use any content that is not your own. Keep documented permissions on file in case the material is called into question. You should never download photos and artwork from the Web to use on your websites, slide presentations, and/or publications without gaining permission from the content owner. Learn more about copyrights from the Virginia Tech Library: <https://guides.lib.vt.edu/oa/copyright>
- Extension Master Gardeners are trained to use the most current version of the Home Grounds and Animals Pest Management Guide, or VCE numbered publications, as required to provide specific chemical controls (i.e., herbicides and pesticides) to homeowners. EMGs may never give recommendations to farmers, producers or landscapers or in any situation where a profit is a factor. Those questions should be referred to the local ANR agent. For further information, see VCE Pesticide Policy Statement, rev. 5/24, https://mastergardener.ext.vt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/VCE-Pesticide-Policy-Statement-93-001_revised2024.pdf.
- VCE strives to comply with applicable federal, state, and local rules and regulations pertaining to the accessibility of our programs and employment opportunities to all. Due to the facilitative and partnership nature of Extension programs, when working with other agencies, organizations, etc. in the conduct of extension efforts the completion of an Equal Access Assurance (EAA) Letter is required. ***This policy is under review and on hold as of July '24. See your agent or coordinator for updates.*
- In accordance with USDA NIFA Policy the “And Justice for All” poster should be displayed at all extension events. For events outside of the local office where this poster is likely posted, a printed copy should be conspicuously displayed during the event. The local agent or coordinator can provide a copy of the latest version of this USDA/NIFA poster.

Acknowledgments

This publication has been adapted from the publication CNRE-124NP *Safety and Risk Management for Virginia Master Naturalist Volunteers* authored by Michelle Prysby, Virginia Master Naturalist Program Director, Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation, Virginia Tech.

<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/CNRE/CNRE-124/CNRE-124.html>

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension: ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and local governments, and is an equal opportunity employer. For the full non-discrimination statement, please visit ext.vt.edu/accessibility.

2025

SPES-699NP

Appendix I: Risk Management Planning Worksheet

Nothing can replace the good management practices of planning, documentation, and training. In order to adequately prepare for any activity, you must prepare for the best and worst that might occur. While there is no inclusive list of items from which to plan your activity, there are some general points from which to start. **Use this “Risk Management Planning Worksheet” as a tool when you are conceptualizing new Extension Master Gardener projects.**

Description

Who is involved in the activity? What are participants asked to do? When will the activity be offered? Where will the program be conducted? Why is this program being conducted?

Volunteers

How many volunteer leaders are needed for this activity to provide adequate supervision of the other participants? What knowledge and skills do volunteers need in order to fulfill their responsibilities? What training and communications will you provide to make sure all the leaders are aware of the safety practices and procedures for this activity?

Safety Procedures

What safety procedures are needed for the activity? Are there some general precautions to be taken? What specific risks should be considered due to the nature of this activity, the time of year that it is being offered, the location, and the number and type of participants?

Medical Procedures and First Aid Practices

What will you do if participants become injured or ill during the activity? How far will you be from emergency medical help? Can you get a cell signal from the location? Where is the nearest hospital? Do you have extra EMGs on-site to be of hand for emergency situations if necessary?

Participant Communications

How will participants be informed of the nature of the activity, the schedule, and the safety procedures ahead of the event? How will you register participants? What instructions will you provide at the event?

Other

Is there any other important information not covered above?

This worksheet is adapted from the Risk Management Planning Worksheet for 4-H Programming at <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/388/388-051/388-051.html> and the Master Naturalist Risk Management Planning Worksheet at <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/CNRE/CNRE-124/CNRE-124.html>.

Appendix II: Risk Identification Worksheet

This worksheet is a tool to help volunteers identify and plan for the risks they are likely to encounter for any activity they are planning to do. It has been adapted from the Master Naturalist Risk Management Planning Worksheet at <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/CNRE/CNRE-124/CNRE-124.html>.

Categories of Risk	Specific Risks for this Activity/ Event	Procedures to Manage These Risks
General Personal Safety		
Program Leadership		
Youth Interactions		
Vulnerable Populations		
Weather and Environment		
Contact with the Public		
Location		
Administrative		
Other Risks		

Appendix III: Field Work Risk Management Checklist

This checklist is a tool to help volunteers who are leading field trips, nature walks, or other outdoor education or service events. It has been adapted from the Master Naturalist Risk Management Planning Worksheet at <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/CNRE/CNRE-124/CNRE-124.html>.

Check	Safety Action	Checklist Item
	Be Aware of Potential Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weather issues (wind, lightning, excessive heat or cold) • uneven, slick surfaces on trails • ticks and various biting or stinging insects • physical exertion, such as from standing for long periods • possible separation from the group • (Identify other relevant risks for the particular activity.)
	Pack Necessary Items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first aid kit • incident report forms • VCE Emergency Card • directions to site with address in case EMS needs it • any notes or documentation of risk management plans • cell phone • registrant list with contact information • site permits or activity permissions, if applicable • (Identify other necessary items for the particular activity.)
	Know What To Do In An Emergency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In an emergency, CALL 911 and follow the procedures on the VCE Emergency Card. • If possible, obtain permission from the injured person to assist them. • Keep your VCE Agent informed using their information from the VCE Emergency Card. • Complete the incident report form for incidents more serious than minor cuts and scrapes. Submit any incident report forms to your Agent. • Provide first aid at the level at which you are trained or certified. Provide supplies for the injured person to administer to themselves if they are able. • Do not leave injured person behind on their own; arrange for someone to stay until help arrives.
	Provide Oversight During the Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use registration forms or check-in sheets to document who is in attendance. • Provide clear instructions and safety precautions at the beginning of the activity. • Ask participants to make the leader aware (privately) of any medical conditions that may be an issue during the activity. • Stay aware of weather conditions and change plans accordingly. • Make sure that participants have opportunities to stay hydrated and to rest. • Account for everyone going and returning before you leave. If they want to leave early or ride with someone else, make sure they tell you. The buddy system can help with this as well.