

About the Certification Exam

by Kelly Noel, Director of Communications

At the recent Coordinators' Conference, someone mentioned the "high failure rate" on the Certification Exam. Master Gardeners of Ontario Inc (MGOI) President Claudette Sims said that the failure rate is quite low, but there was no time right then and there to back this up with facts and figures. At its meeting the next day, the board decided we should set this record straight – inform all members of the actual numbers – and make sure that everybody knows that the success rate for exam candidates is high.

History

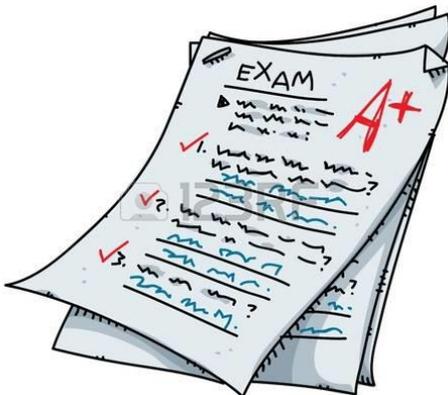
First some history: There has always been an exam option available in the MG program in Ontario. Early on, volunteers who had previous relevant training or industry experience were able to take the closed-book "Exemption Examination" (pass mark 80%) instead of the correspondence courses from Guelph.

In 2005 Guelph discontinued the correspondence courses and introduced online certificate courses which were considerably more expensive. MGOI explored the possibility of developing courses in partnership with the Niagara Parks School of Horticulture but soon realized that this would be prohibitively expensive, requiring charging a high tuition. Instead MGOI decided to provide a tuition-free option: Master Gardeners in Training (MGiTs) could opt to undertake a program of self-directed study and then write an examination. The Exemption Examination was revised and renamed the "Certification Examination". Candidates could still choose to take 3 online courses from Guelph. In 2007, the option of taking courses from the Nova Scotia College of Agriculture (now Dalhousie) was added.

The Numbers

MGOI has kept a record of every Certification Exam result since it was introduced. Here are the numbers for ALL exams written, including any by those who have since resigned or retired:

- The exam has been written 112 times and there have been 12 failures.
- Five who failed wrote another exam and all passed the second time. So 107 members have written and 100 of them have passed – a 93.5% success rate.
- There are 3 versions of the exam and they appear to be equally discriminating – with 5, 3 and 4 failures.
- Of the 7 people who failed and did not rewrite: 3 resigned, 2 took courses instead, 1 moved away from Ontario two years later, and 1 is still a member.
- 9 to 11 candidates take the exam each year.



The current MGOI Education Committee is pleased with this record. They feel that the committee back in 2005 got it right when they decided that the pass mark would be 70% and the exam should be open book (candidates could bring print (on paper) resources of their own choosing).

The high success rate shows that MGiTs who are choosing this education option are making a choice which has worked well for them. It shows that the great majority of members who attempt this exam are adequately prepared and not suffering from "exam-fright".

These numbers also show that the exam does provide some challenge – it is not a walk-over.

Honour System

Exams are sent to coordinators for a specific candidate upon receipt of the \$50 fee to MGOI. Coordinators, invigilators and candidates must sign a declaration stating that MGOI rules have been followed in the handling and writing of the exam (writing time was limited to 2.5 hours, only paper resources were used, and the exam was not copied).

Prior training?

Another incorrect notion is that only MGITS with previous training or industry experience take the exam option.

In 2013, the Education Committee surveyed MGs who had qualified since the self-study option had been available. Candidates who had taken the exam were asked if they had had previous training or industry experience. Only one-third said yes. So the majority of exam candidates to that point did not have prior training. We have not done another survey since but expect that that number has stayed as consistent as the success rate. At the time of the survey, 60 candidates had written and 56 had passed – a 93.3% success rate.

(The complete Education Survey Report 2013 is available on the member's side of <http://mgoi.ca> on the Education tab.)

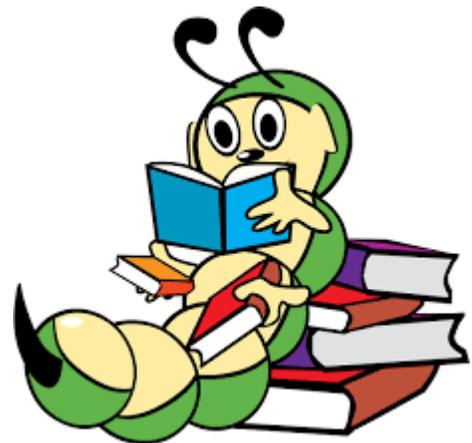
Should you choose this option?

Any MGIT may choose to take this education path but any that do must understand that this really is INDEPENDENT study - they must plan and manage their own preparation including choosing resources.

The MGOI Education Committee has prepared a short document called '*Requirements for Certification Exam (Basic Knowledge)*' which includes an outline of subjects that MGs should know as well as tips on writing the exam and some sample questions. The '*Reference Manual for Ontario Master Gardener*' is another useful resource but neither of these resources should be considered sufficient. (Both documents are available on the member's side of <http://mgoi.ca> on the Education tab).

This route is not as costly as taking courses, but it is NOT necessarily easier.

- Course candidates are expected to put in 10 to 12 hours per week during the course but someone else is telling them what to study and in what level of detail, which resources to use, and they have an instructor and classmates with whom to interact.
- Self-studiers have to make their own plan, decide on a sequence of topics, decide how much time to spend on each, and decide which resources to use. And they have to decide when they are ready to take the exam. The exam is open book but there is not enough time to look up everything so the candidate must be prepared to answer most questions without needing to check.
- But virtually everyone who joins a Master Gardener group is already an experienced home gardener with a good knowledge base. What they then have to decide is whether to build on that base by taking courses or studying on their own.



MGITs who choose to study on their own likely know that they have the motivation and discipline to manage their own learning. The high success rate on the Certification Exam suggests that the great majority of self-study candidates made a decision that worked well for them!!