

## Mary Bianchi – CA-ASA Honoree

### University of California Cooperative Extension Farm Advisor and County Director

*If you see that there's a need, you just find a way to make it work.  
You find the people that are willing to do that with you and it happens.*

*You create change one person at a time by listening to what they have to say and respecting the fact that they are bringing their own successes, constraints and baggage that you don't know about.*



### Mary Bianchi

Mary Bianchi had a long and distinguished career with University of California Cooperative Extension as a Farm Advisor in San Luis Obispo and the Program Advisor for the UC Master Gardener Programs in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties. She also served as County Director for UC Cooperative Extension programs in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties.

Mary holds BS and MS degrees in soils and agricultural sciences from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. She began a career with the University of California Cooperative Extension in 1984, serving Santa Cruz, Tulare, Napa and Santa Barbara Counties and at the UC Kearney Agricultural Center, before transferring to San Luis Obispo County in September 1992 where she spent 25 years until her retirement in 2017.

Mary's willingness to tackle whatever needs were most pressing to the community she served meant that her professional work routinely challenged her to be a lifelong learner, a role she enthusiastically embraced, and modeled for younger colleagues. Her mantra, "if you can prove it you can say it", drove her to a meticulous review of information, and a willingness to say only what she could confidently support with solid evidence. Her ability to bring together diverse stakeholders to share information, challenge assumptions and build opportunities for progress led to tremendous impact in the communities she served. She was routinely invited to speak on a wide range of topics including water resources management, grapevine nutrition and pest management, vineyard development, vine pruning and training, citrus and avocado pests and diseases, walnut pest management, water quality and nonpoint source pollution, field experimentation and statistical analysis.

Over her years of service Mary won many awards, among them the 2014 Bradford Rominger Agricultural Sustainability Leadership Award, which honors those who approach major agricultural challenges with grace, honesty, and a commitment to collaboration across disciplines and interests. Like the Bradford Rominger award, the CALASA award honors not just accomplishment, but an ethic of service and broad engagement with the people she serves.

Below are a few of the many projects that mark Mary as an outstanding contributor to her profession and the communities she has served.

During her tenure in San Luis Obispo County, Mary noted the needs of the urban horticulture community and began coordination of a new Master Gardener Program, with the first class graduating in June 1996, and assumed the Santa Barbara County Program in 2009. Graduating hundreds of Master Gardeners during the years of her service, she helped establish an active membership that staffs phonelines for urban gardening questions, maintains a monthly presence at five local Farmer's Markets as well as in local newspapers and offers numerous local demonstrations and presentations. Even during her retirement, Mary has continued to travel long distances to present trainings for this group.

In 1999, in response to concerns about water quality impairments in the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Mary developed and directed the 119 team members of the University of California Farm Water Quality Project, a seven year effort reaching irrigated agriculture producers with extension education on on-farm water quality planning to manage non-point source pollutants. This multi-disciplinary, multiagency project reached 2,200 producers in seven counties and was awarded the 2006 ANR Distinguished Service Award for Outstanding Teamwork and the 2008 Western Extension Directors Award.

As an extension of the Farm Water Quality Project, in 2008 Mary was a core member of a four person team that managed a stakeholder analysis of the impacts of food safety concerns on conservation in the Central Coast region following a foodborne illness outbreak associated with produce sourced from the region. The project required both careful review of evidence and extensive discussion among stakeholders and technical experts to evaluate the information within the context of local conditions. Mary's ability to manage extensive UC specialist review of the report built a credible end result, which supported a positive and productive dialogue among stakeholders both immediately and for the years since. Following this work, Mary saw a need for more cross-discipline education and created an online learning course to address this need. She also spearheaded a cross-discipline dialogue with produce buyers, food safety professionals and conservation professionals to build understanding and balanced management approaches that protected both food safety and conservation.

When California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) started to require that maintenance gardeners be licensed if they used pesticides incidentally as part of their work, Mary spearheaded a DPR funded Pest Management Alliance project in 2010. The project developed a full Spanish/English curriculum of training that not only focused on providing Integrated Pest Management (IPM) education for maintenance gardeners, but also reached retailers where the gardeners purchased the pesticides. This project used peer trainers, and helped reach a largely unreachable audience. Through Mary's leadership and vision successes included improved decisions about pest management by maintenance Gardeners in local landscapes, safer working conditions, reductions in pesticide use /misuse, and improved business skills for Gardeners. This project was married to a CA Department of Pesticide Regulation pilot project to increase the number of Maintenance Gardeners licensed in San Luis Obispo County that Mary also developed and led.

Mary facilitated a community discussion on coexistence measures for conventional, organic, and genetically modified crops. She recruited a team of UCCE specialists and Advisors to inform decisions on agricultural water reuse for the Los Osos sewer project. Working with a multi-disciplinary team in 2010, she created a soil resources planning document for SLO County land-use decisions by both public and private parties. Other projects focused on drought management strategies and plant phenology as a tool for landscape pest management.

Throughout her career, Mary was an active member of the Soil Science Society of America, the American Society for Horticultural Science, the California Avocado Society, and the California Chapter of the American Society of Agronomy. She served on the governing board of the CALASA and was President in 2011. Over the course of her career she was a member of the Cal Poly San Luis Obispo Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences Advisory Council, the Steering Committee for the UC Statewide Master Gardener Program, and the University of California Lindcove Citrus Research and Extension Center's Research Advisory Committee. During her career she participated in University of California working groups on water resources, urban horticulture, and subtropical crops.

In her retirement Mary continues to work to improve awareness of the public policy efforts and products of individual county Advisors, and on the complex interaction of food safety and water quality public and private regulations on fresh produce production in the United States.

Retirement has allowed Mary to increase her involvement with the San Luis Obispo County Behavioral Health Board and the Center for Family Strengthening, as well as Friends of Martha's Place Children's Assessment Center – focusing on the development of children ages 0 to 5.