The Culinary Arts Institute at Mississippi University for Women kicked its cuisine up another notch after partnering with Mississippi State University to restore the program's overcrowded herb garden.

The garden still features many common herbs, such as sage, oregano and thyme, but it now includes several varieties of each one. In the works are plans to add fruit trees and other plants that will broaden students' knowledge of the preparation and presentation of food.

Members of the Lowndes County Master Gardeners, an outreach program of MSU's Extension Service, were the driving force behind the restoration.

"The old herb garden was massive and many of the plants were crammed in and overcrowded," said Extension area horticulturist Jeff Wilson. "We pruned and cleared to give plants breathing room and to improve aesthetic appeal."

The group literally reworked the garden from the ground up.

"The garden was framed with treated lumber that was at least 10 years old, and it was a mess," said Wilson, who also is interim Extension director in Lowndes County. "We removed the old planks last August and prepped the beds with organic matter."

Wilson drew a new design and worked with the Master Gardeners to devise a maintenance plan for watering, weeding and fertilization.

"Getting the herb garden cleaned out was quite a challenge and took coordination," said Lowndes County Master Gardener President Jennifer Duzan. "The landscape crew at MUW helped remove the lumber and laid out the attractive stones Jeff chose for the garden's foundation and walkways."

The design included plans for new varieties of herbs from a wish list prepared by the institute's executive chef, Erich Ogle. Master Gardeners researched this list, noting the plants that would grow well in the area.

"We wanted the look of the garden to integrate well with the landscape and features of MUW's campus," Duzan said. "Lowndes County is in the Zone 7 growing region, and our research indicated that several herbs Chef Erich wanted could do well here with proper maintenance."

The Master Gardener program is a statewide organization of volunteers trained in horticulture. They perform many community projects and present educational programs for garden clubs and other civic groups.

"The Culinary Arts Institute prepares food for many university groups and functions, which enriches the education of students learning the art of food preparation," Wilson said. "The staff came to Extension because of our experience in growing and maintaining plants. Education is a cornerstone for MUW, and it is a cornerstone for our Master Gardener program, too."

Wilson said he hopes the cooperation between the Master Gardeners and the Culinary Arts Institute will pave the way for educational programs on horticulture in an attractive setting that serves as a living laboratory.

"People have a growing interest in learning to eat healthy, and one of the ways to do that is to incorporate fresh herbs, many of which have antioxidant properties," Wilson said. "We wanted this herb garden to be a work in progress, and we hope people will take advantage of it to learn about healthy eating through this cooperative effort between MSU and MUW."