Although the words “gardening boot camp” somehow conjure up the image of having to drop and do 20 pushups among the daisies, the reality turns out to be altogether different.

Going to this boot camp made me feel like a college student again, only this time at an action-packed horticultural college. And better yet, no exams.

At the recent Monterey Bay Master Gardeners’ Home Gardening Boot Camp, held at Cabrillo College, I learned the following fascinating facts:

- Good compost doesn’t stink.
- Butterflies taste with their feet.
- Ornamental trees don’t have to be pruned every year.
- Adding an aspirin to vase water won’t make cut flowers last longer.
- And last but not least, a good tall fence is the only thing that will keep deer out of your garden permanently — other methods, like motion-activated sprinklers and smelly sprays, will work, but not as long as you want them to.

I had been hankering to go to Home Gardening Boot Camp ever since it began three years ago, but hadn’t been able to get there before this year. The daylong event is modeled after a similar program in Santa Barbara, and it has been a hit with our local gardeners since it began.

About 150 gardening students gathered the morning of June 15 at the Cabrillo College Horticulture Center where, after a keynote address, we separated into various indoor and outdoor classrooms.

All who attended were able to choose from more than 20 classes in a wide variety of topics, everything from organic gardening to soil composition. The boot camp drew avid gardeners from all around the Monterey Bay, and as far away as the San Francisco Bay Area.

Randy and Michele Kitts came all the way from Fairfield for the Boot Camp and thoroughly enjoyed it.

"I really liked the class on reading pesticide labels. I walked away feeling so empowered," said Michele Kitts, who said they learned of the event through friends who live in the Santa Cruz area.

Denise Weatherwax, president of MBMG and co-chair of the Boot Camp, notes that the goal of Home Gardening Boot Camp and, indeed, MBMG in general, is making science-based information on gardening available to the public. At the same time, she said, "We like to try to make it fun."

Most of the classes are designed to be of interest to a wide audience, like one I took called "Bees and Butterflies and Birds, Oh My!" in which instructor Lisa McAndrews talked about some common pollinators and the kinds of plants that attract them. She even took us on an impromptu walk through the Horticulture Center grounds to scout out plants like yarrow, sticky monkeyflower and white sage, all of which can tempt bees, butterflies and hummingbirds to our yards.

It takes considerable volunteer power to put this on, with about 50 people helping out, plus the lecturers who gave their time and expertise that day. Among them were Joe Truskit, Salinas resident and Master Rosarian, and Peter Quintanilla, a certified arborist and aesthetic pruner from the Monterey Peninsula.

Those of us who signed up for the daylong event had a variety of nice little surprises along the way. Fruit, pastries and coffee greeted us in the morning. Throughout the day, free seeds, plants, and even water pitchers were distributed.

A plant sale caught many participants’ attention, with the Horticultural Center offering a wide variety of salvias and other plants perfect for coastal California gardens.

The instruction began in earnest that morning with the keynote address, given by Steve Tjosvold, UC Extension farm adviser to Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, whose goal was to do some serious garden mythbusting. Gardeners often rely on non-scientific hand-me-down information, and I’m afraid I’m guilty as charged.

Tjosvold exploded a few myths that I previously believed, such as the idea that adding pebbles to a plant pot will improve drainage (it doesn’t!) and whether plants prefer classical music over rock ‘n’ roll (they don’t seem to care what kind of tunes you have playing).

One of the big ones was the idea of additives to vase water to make cut flowers last longer. Does it actually work to put in an aspirin, a penny or a little wine? Tjosvold revealed the truth: none of these make much difference.

But what does aid your blooms, he said, is adding lemon-lime soda and a little bleach to the water — soda to provide energy to the flowers, and bleach to kill bacteria that could grow in the stems. Keeping the flowers in a cool spot helps.

I also found out the depressing truth from Dr. Robert Timm, a UC Extension wildlife specialist, that deer are mostly too smart for us. Timm, the instructor for my final class of the day, spoke about large vertebrate pests such as deer, skunks and raccoons. His research has shown that nothing discourages deer for very long.

He recommends a good, high fence — and electrified, if possible.

I also learned what I had been doing wrong in trying to make compost (just about everything), and how to make proper pruning cuts to trees, which is honestly something I never thought about too much. But now I know how it should be done.

Next year’s Boot Camp hasn’t been scheduled yet, but keep checking for information on the Monterey Bay Master Gardeners’ website, mbmg.org.