

# impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

## Zoom as a delivery method for multi-county master gardener programming

### AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension meet rural clientele needs by delivering the Idaho Master Gardener Program via Zoom.

### The Situation

Many individuals in rural counties seek opportunities to take the Idaho Master Gardener Program and other horticulture programs offered by Extension educators. Only horticulture trained Extension educators can offer the Idaho Master Gardener Program. Long distances and winter road conditions in Idaho make it difficult to offer these courses in other counties where they are needed.

Transitioning the Idaho Master Gardener Program and other courses to a digital format, like Zoom, provides an opportunity for these courses to be offered from a county with an active program into rural counties. Zoom allows for interaction between the instructor and the participants where they can be seen, ask question, and be a participant in the program. This program also provides rural communities with trained volunteers to help keep the program active and provide additional service to the counties, in which they reside.

### Our Response

A pilot program was developed to evaluate the use of Zoom as a delivery method for the Idaho Master Gardener course between Twin Falls, Gooding and Blaine counties. The UI Extension office in Twin Falls



Instructor Andy West at a satellite classroom during a master gardener class. Photo permission: Drew Nash, Times-News.

was the main site for the course, and the Sawtooth Botanical Gardens offered to host the program and facilitate the delivery of the course in Blaine County. One individual in Gooding County participated in this course from home to provide an additional perspective of not meeting with a group. Applications were sent out to individuals that had contacted the UI Extension offices for information on the next available course. Registration was capped at 20 individuals per site. A total of 27 participants began the course and 15 completed the course.

Course participants were informed that this would be a pilot program and that their feedback would be valuable in making this and other courses available. A survey was developed to evaluate Zoom as the delivery

method for this course in addition to the regular Idaho Master Gardener course evaluation. This survey allowed us to look at what worked, areas that needed improvement and additional options to improve the facilitation of using Zoom as the delivery method.

The course included other Extension educators, specialists and industry professionals to teach the program topics. Presenters were given the option of presenting in Twin Falls or Hailey, of which half presented from Twin Falls and the others from Hailey. This approach provided an opportunity to address some of the issues that were affecting the remote sites.

## Program Outcomes

This program delivered by Zoom provided an opportunity for 20 individuals, who would otherwise have had to travel an hour and a half one way to take this course the ability to participate in their county. Ten of the 20 completed the course in Blaine County. Four of the 10 went on to become a certified Idaho Master Gardener, which is consistent with past face-to-face courses offered. The cost savings of travel were \$1,357.20 per individual for the course according to the 2019 federal rate of 58 cents a mile. An average of 50 volunteer hours per individual was contributed by those who certified. The return value to the county and community for those volunteer hours completed was

\$4,428 per individual for a total of 200 hours with a total amount of \$17,712 according to the 2019 state of Idaho volunteer hourly rate of \$22.14 an hour. This delivery method allows UI Extension educators with limited or no horticulture appointments to meet the needs of their county by offering the Idaho Master Gardener Program and other horticulture programming to their clientele. However, participants need to be flexible and willing to learn in different ways other than a traditional face-to-face course. There is some learning curve to utilizing Zoom technology. A comment from one participant surveyed stated, "Zoom enabled flexible participation for more students, and enabled less travel for instructors, but required more tech preparation." Other comments centered around figuring out how to use Zoom and the technical challenges faced.

## The Future

A lot was learned from this pilot program on what was useful and where improvements were needed. Moving forward, we hope to expand this program and acquire funding to purchase additional equipment to make this course more practical and apply the knowledge learned from this pilot program to expand the reach of programming not only in Idaho but nationally as well. We plan to expand the size of the program in the coming years to include more counties throughout the state.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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