

# impact

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

## Growing the master gardener program using hybrid online/in-person learning

### AT A GLANCE

Using hybrid learning, the Idaho Master Gardener Program efficiently reached rural communities, as well as adapted to COVID-19 health restrictions.

### The Situation

There is growing interest in gardening and horticulture throughout Idaho and nationally. Yet, it's difficult to deliver the Idaho Master Gardener (IMG) Program to many rural counties in part due to remote locations, limited funding and staff capacity, and hazardous winter weather impacting travel.

Further, in the past little to no horticulture programming was offered online with University of Idaho Extension, which limited participant outreach. In 2019, Extension educators Andy West and Jennifer Werlin proposed to expand the Idaho Master Gardener Program in eastern and central Idaho by utilizing a hybrid online/in-person format.

Participants of hybrid classes can benefit from in-person classroom experiences and presentations delivered remotely by skilled faculty. There are also added benefits of program efficiency and cost savings.

### Our Response

West and Werlin led an in-person training in November 2019 for regional Extension educators who wanted to participate in a hybrid IMG program in January 2020. Educators divided curriculum topics and



Using Meeting Owl 360° and Zoom technology, Stephen Love, delivers an in-person and remote presentation to students.

received training on utilizing Meeting Owl 360° video technology to conduct classes. Two class times for the course were chosen to accommodate staff and participant schedules at seven sites.

Midway through the course, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the transition from face-to-face classes to solely online delivery. Having a hybrid program made for a relatively seamless transition since participants could login to the course remotely via Zoom.

An online course evaluation was conducted so that course instructors could learn about the successes and challenges, including the transition to at-home Zoom delivery.

## Program Outcomes

This program instructed 87 potential new volunteers across Idaho. The data showed that the hybrid format was a successful delivery format, but participants missed the personal interaction when no in-person classes were held. Fortunately, participants all had access to online streaming. Analysis of the data provided information on the effectiveness of the delivery method and areas where improvements are needed.

Student and instructor suggestions for improvement include: 1) increase picture quality and size of slide visuals; 2) involve remote locations with information discussed from other locations; 3) follow-up and review assignments and quizzes; and 4) incorporate more hands-on activities and demonstrations.

When classes were changed to remote meetings, additional challenges arose. Course facilitators and presenters need a prerequisite training including formatting and scheduling of classes and assignments. Both instructors and students should receive technology instruction on how to use Zoom and its main features. Handouts should be made available prior to the night of class so individuals can have time to print them for note taking. Last, using the Zoom breakout room feature could provide more intimate group discussions.

Implementing small adjustments throughout the course improved overall course outcomes. Using a designated facilitator to mute participants and monitor the chat feature helped the presenter focus on the presentation. Each site facilitator was designated as a co-host to quickly remedy issues. All presentations were recorded and made available for reference.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Overall, 70% of the participants indicated that they were satisfied with the use of Zoom delivery.

Evaluation comments included:

- “Good platform that could be used effectively with live classes.”
- “The presenters were well prepared. The chat and audio capabilities for asking real-time questions made the class on Zoom seem more like an in-person classroom experience.”
- One facilitator stated: “Glad I participated in this hybrid course experiment; without it, I would have canceled my IMG course mid-course due to COVID-19.”



## The Future

Educators plan to develop an IMG facilitator’s guide with course templates, lesson outlines and PowerPoint presentations. Extension specialists and educators can continue to collaborate and offer IMG program assistance to new educators. Not only do the educators benefit by learning from and working together, more Idahoans in underserved areas can also learn and explore the IMG program.