

impact

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

Blind and visually impaired gardeners help the sighted truly see

AT A GLANCE

Idaho master gardeners learn from fellow gardeners who are blind or visually impaired, what knowledge and skills are needed to better serve this diverse audience.

The Situation

According to the 2018 National Health Interview Survey, 32.2 million American adults reported having vision loss. The National Federation of the Blind estimates there are at least 46,000 visually impaired and blind persons in Idaho; however, vision impairment is believed to be an under reported condition. The challenges for those who are blind or visually impaired are numerous, from access to information and the natural environment to inclusivity and human interactions.

Vision loss often means an end to outdoor activities. The benefits of being outdoors have long been studied and even prescribed by psychiatrists and other medical doctors to relieve stress, improve mental well-being, and promote quicker recovery from physical and mental injuries. Researchers in Japan found that walking in a forest have beneficial effects on blood pressure, blood glucose levels, heart rate and immune function. Other researchers suggest that simply being outdoors boosts vitamin D levels thus lifting mood. The benefits of being outdoors is an integral part of wellness. The need for humans to be outside is further supported by the 2020 National Gardening Survey which found that more than 74% of all U.S. households participate in gardening activities. Gardening promotes fellowship



Jan in her California garden touching the hedge that helped her negotiate her way.

through information transfer. Whether a gardener asks questions while making purchases at a nursery, attends a gardening seminar or shares planting tips with a friend, gardening keeps people connected.

Our Response

Gardening is a productive, creative and satisfying outdoor activity, yet to be successful, gardeners must have access to horticultural information to improve their knowledge and skills. Obtaining gardening information prior to the internet was a challenge for those with vision loss. The Ada County master gardeners (MG) back in 1991 decided to help fill this gardening information void. They read 45 University of Idaho horticulture bulletins onto tapes for the Idaho Commission for the Blind. Shortly after that project, a

gardener named Deborah who was blind, joined the Ada County MG program. Deb completed her MG certification, which included 51 hours of classroom horticulture training and 50 hours of volunteer community service. The following year she completed the Advanced Master Gardener (AMG) certification of 33 hours of classroom training and 30 hours of volunteer service. UI Extension had Deb's MG certificates printed in braille with the help of the Idaho Commission for the Blind. Deb stayed with the AMG program for several years and was able to give her fellow students some valuable insights into her gardening skills and experiences. When she discussed pruning and mowing in her yard, the students marveled at her self-reliance. They enjoyed Deb's humor as she quipped that mowing made her kids behave better. When asked how, Deb commented, "Do you know how much damage a power mower does to plastic toys? My kids now pick up their toys when I ask them to." The students were learning how resourceful and self-sufficient Deb truly was. During one class, students were asked to close their eyes and use their tactile and olfactory senses to experience herb plants. After the activity, Deb remarked that she had the advantage because she had attuned her senses from an early age. Deb's fellow students realized that just closing their eyes would not give them the heightened awareness of someone who had been using their senses for a lifetime. When Deb left the program, the master gardeners decided to further hone their senses by planting an herb garden behind the Extension office.

Program Outcomes

The herb garden was maintained by master gardeners for the next 15 years as part of the Extension office landscape. The garden was also used by family and consumer sciences and 4-H faculty when teaching nutrition and summer youth activities. In 2018, the MG students installed a second herb garden with hopes of making it accessible to the public as a sensory garden,

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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but its location was not ideal due to an adjacent parking lot.

The students still had much to learn about creating a viable sensory garden. It was in 2019 when Jan, a California gardener who was blind, visited the advanced MG class and showed the 65 students what was really needed to make a garden truly useful and accessible for the blind and visually impaired. Jan discussed techniques she employed to design and negotiate her extensive landscape. She talked about how she used sounds, the feel of a change in path material underfoot and the touch of a hedge next to a walkway to determine where she was in her garden. The joyful sounds of water features and windchimes also helped her find her way. The colorful PowerPoint slides of her garden that she created with her cousin, a student in the class, stunned the audience. "When I sit with my husband outside," Jan shared, "the birds come very close because we are not a threat. We are not looking at them." (Jan's husband, a musician, was also blind.) The students realized that one does not have to be sighted to enjoy bird songs, plant and path textures or the many other beauties found in a garden.

Jan's gardening skills and unshakeable spirit astonished the students; they decided right then and there to make her an Honorary Idaho Master Gardener. A master gardener certificate printed in braille was sent to Jan's home. Jan died from cancer, but her brief visit left a legacy of appreciation and new knowledge among the master gardeners. They decided to install a sensory garden for the blind and visually impaired.

The Future

Research is currently being gathered by MG students on designs and features appropriate for sensory stimulation and safe negotiation of an area for the blind and visually impaired. Deborah, our former MG student who was blind, has returned to the MG program and plans to assist with this special garden. Working together, the students will learn to appreciate each other's perspectives and perceptions of the natural world.