

impact

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

Garden school increases access to adult learning opportunities and new audiences

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension expands continuing education opportunities for adult learners and new audiences through long-term collaboration with local greenhouse business.

The Situation

The population of Ada County reached 494,967 in 2020, two years later it was estimated at 518,907 and still growing. With this ever-increasing population growth in Boise and surrounding areas, the demand for horticulture information from residents has blossomed. People moving into the area from other states are often not familiar with the plants, climate, soils or plant diseases and insects in the area. Whether a person lives on an acreage or in an apartment, people secure similar benefits from having a garden such as satisfaction from growing produce, flowers or landscape plants; plus being able to surround themselves with beauty. Research has shown that gardening reduces obesity and stress.

Local nurseries, greenhouses and garden centers are where many gardeners go for face-to-face answers to their horticultural queries, but green industry workers often are too busy to offer lengthy private tutoring to each customer. Green industries in the Boise Valley have long depended on the University of Idaho (UI) Extension for horticultural information and educational programming for their employees and their customers.



Idaho Master Gardener teaching at a Spring Garden School at Edwards Greenhouse.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension horticulture educator, Susan Bell, initiated a collaboration with one of the largest and best-known annual and perennial plant suppliers in the Boise area, Edwards Greenhouse, to offer a Spring Garden School at their facilities. Having a garden school hosted in fragrant, flower filled greenhouses in mid-February was just the panacea needed by winter confined gardeners and a great way to bolster master gardeners' (MG) skills.

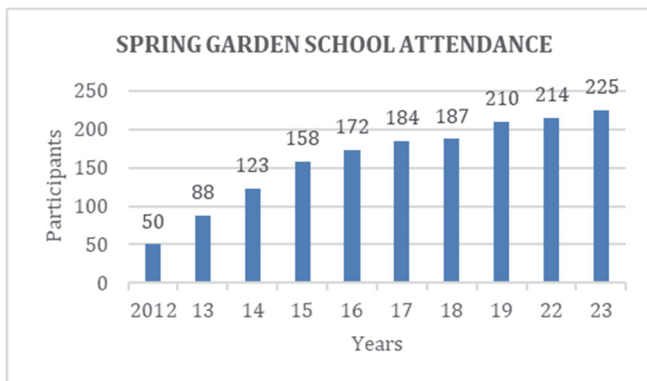
The school was marketed in the beginning using mass media outlets, and later various social media were added. Speakers were selected from UI Extension educators, Ada County's Advanced Idaho Master

Gardeners and local experts. Two to three classes were offered simultaneously in different locations in the greenhouses. At the end of each school, time was allotted for the audience to ask questions of a panel made up of the presenters. Due to the constraints of the greenhouse environment, microphones were a necessity and visual aids were kept simple by using white boards, posters and lots of hands-on demonstrations. A small registration fee was collected from attendees to pay for refreshments, chair rental, speaker supplies and handouts.

Program Outcomes

The 2012 Spring Garden School turned into an annual event that ran consecutively from 2012 to 2023, with a two-year pandemic break. Observations made on MG volunteers were: 1) Teaching at the schools helped hone the public speaking skills of many MG students. 2) The schools encouraged teamwork and camaraderie amongst the MG students as they were responsible for the school's logistics. 3) Improved MG confidence levels were noticeable with those students who worked with the public as registrants, cashiers, timekeepers, speaker assistants, monitors, guides and parking lot assistants.

Spring Garden School attendance increased each year, eventually it reached Edwards' suggested limit of 225. Over this 10-year period, 1,611 people attended the annual spring garden schools from Idaho and Oregon.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Program surveys, printed on the back of the entry tickets, were collected at the end of each school to gauge participants learning, their future planned actions and future topics desired. Ninety-eight to 99% of participants over the 10-year period indicated that their knowledge increased by attending the schools. The latest survey compiled listed 53 different behaviors that participants planned to change in their gardening practices; the most frequently listed for 2023 were:

- Start a compost pile and use more organic matter to improve soil.
- Improve irrigation timing and use mulches to conserve water.
- Plant more native plants and drought tolerant turf species.
- Change fruit tree culture, including pruning methods, for improved yields.
- Follow fertilizer and pesticide labels more carefully for safety, and to prevent runoff and over-use.
- Build raised beds, plan out flowering perennial beds using a color wheel for seasonal color.
- Improve the choice of container medium and plants selected.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

- Garnette Edwards and Erin Monnie, owners of Edwards Greenhouse and Flower Shop