

IMPACT



Bonner County Extension, 4205 N. Boyer Ave., Sandpoint, ID 83864; 208-263-8511; Fax: 208-263-6191

Master Gardeners Rejuvenated at District I Conference

The Situation

The Master Gardener program started with the idea that local experienced gardeners could receive additional training in the horticultural sciences, and in return would share their expertise through educational and community service projects. The reality of any volunteer organization, however, is that after a time, volunteers' interests move on to other things. As some Master Gardeners become inactive, more Master Gardeners must be trained to take their place. In addition, the experience they gained as an active Master Gardener is lost.

Our Response

Increasing retention of Master Gardeners was identified as a priority by the Commercial and Consumer Horticulture Topic Team in 2002. To achieve this, a plan was devised to develop a statewide Master Gardener conference. Initially this involved using a UI Extension grant to send 20 Idaho Master Gardeners to the statewide Master Gardener conference in Oregon. Here they would get first-hand experience in a statewide conference. Upon their return, they would be expected to create a Master Gardener conference for Idaho. However, after the Oregon conference many of these Master Gardeners found the thought of developing a statewide conference quite daunting and expressed a desire to start with several smaller, district-based conferences. In response to this need, each district planned a Master Gardener conference in 2004. In District I, the effort was led by an Extension Educator from Bonner County. An organizational

meeting held in November 2003 indicated that there was extensive interest in producing such a conference and in organizing a high quality event at the lowest cost possible. Further discussions led to a plan for a three-day conference with the objectives to:

- Provide additional in-depth training for Master Gardeners.
- Increase Master Gardener subject matter and teaching skills.
- Increase retention in the Master Gardener program.
- Promote the Master Gardener program to the community.

Additionally, it was stressed that the conference should be organized by Master Gardeners to meet their needs. Over 30 Master Gardeners from 6 counties participated in planning and implementing this event. Educational content was targeted at a level appropriate for people who had completed the Beginning Master Gardener training. Class topics were selected based on an interest survey of District I Master Gardeners.

The conference extended over three days and included a half day of training in teaching skills. This was followed by a day and a half of multi-track horticultural content classes. In addition to the classroom presentations, there were outdoor demonstrations, tours, and a banquet with a keynote speaker.

Costs were kept to a minimum by taking advantage of local expertise thus reducing speaker costs, and by holding the conference at North Idaho College. Dorm rooms were available at a reasonable cost for those staying overnight. Additional funds were raised from sponsorships by local businesses, advertisements sold on the brochure, a silent auction, and a raffle. The conference was offered for a \$40 registration fee. In addition, a UI Extension grant provided \$1,000 seed money for the conference.

The conference was promoted to all Master Gardeners in District I, and to extension offices in the rest of the state, eastern Washington and western Montana. In order to promote the Master Gardener program to the community, the conference was open to the general public as well.

Evaluations of the speakers and the overall conference were conducted.

Program Outcomes

- One hundred people attended the conference of which 38 completed evaluations. Overall, the conference was quite well received and feedback was very positive.
- Participants rated the presentation quality at 3.57, facilities at 3.82, food at 3.12 and organization at 3.46 (on a 1-4 scale).

Other highlights from the evaluations:

- 100% of participants felt the conference was worth their time to attend.
- 97% are interested in attending another Master Gardener conference in the area.
- 97% plan to use the information to improve their own garden or landscape.
- 100% plan to use what they learned to help others.
- Of the 31 Master Gardeners responding, 100% felt the conference increased their interest in continuing as a Master Gardener.
- Of the 4 non-Master Gardeners responding, 75% indicated the conference made them interested in becoming a Master Gardener.

The Future

The steering committee has agreed to organize another regional conference to be held in 2006. WSU Master Gardeners will be invited to join in planning the next event.

For More Information

Robert Wilson, Extension Educator
Bonner County Extension
4205 N. Boyer Ave.
Sandpoint, ID 83864
208-263-8511
Fax: 208-263-6191
Email: rwilson@uidaho.edu

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