

IMPACT

University of Idaho
Extension

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Payette Valley Master Gardener Program Evaluating the Learning Curve

The Situation

The primary goal of the Idaho Master Gardener Program is to train volunteers to assist University of Idaho Extension and communities with home horticulture diagnostics, as well as provide support for a variety of special community service projects.

Payette County has not reported any trained Master Gardeners in the past three years due to faculty vacancies. This absence of the Master Gardener Program has decreased the visual exposure of the Extension office and reduced the amount of horticulture outreach to the community.



The Master Gardener course objective is to provide students 14 weeks of training in various aspects of horticulture to increase their understanding and motivate them to practice and recommend sustainable and integrated pest management techniques. The program then asks the participants

to give back to the program through special community service projects and Extension office diagnostics. As Master Gardener participants recommend techniques to others, they serve Extension's outreach purposes and protect and enhance the urban landscape.

Our Response

To assess goal achievement, pre- and post-class surveys and quizzes were administered to 30 students in Spring of 2007.

The survey asked nine questions about habits and perceptions of gardening activities and knowledge. The quiz contained 20 challenging True/False questions designed to be difficult for an "average" gardener. Topics in the quiz were covered in the course lectures. Pre- and post-survey and quiz results were compared.

Program Outcomes

Pre-class survey results indicate that few professionals took the class, as 90% of the students were not employed in the horticulture industry. In fact, 62% of the students rated their knowledge of horticulture in the weak category. However, 65% planned to spend more time in the garden after the class. Some participants (38%) said they already used sustainable techniques and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices in their landscapes. Surprisingly, more than half the class did not understand University of Idaho Extension's purpose in their community. It is assumed the participant's lack of understanding regarding Extension's purpose

coincided with a lack of knowledge of the Idaho Master Gardener Program. This information helps to explain the reason why 51% of participants were unaware of the course requirement to complete a special community service project.



At the end of the class, more students indicated they practiced sustainable horticulture techniques and IPM in their landscapes. This indicates they either adopted sustainable techniques during the class, or came to the realization that they were already practicing them. In addition, 40% of students taking the class did not change their composting habits, a very sustainable technique, which indicates prior knowledge of sustainable practices and IPM.

Students felt their knowledge and potential skills as Master Gardeners were greater at the end of the course. This was matched by the results of the quiz. Not only did they feel more confident, but also their technical knowledge was greater. Students started out with an average of 62% on the technical knowledge quiz, a similar score compared to other Master Gardener Programs in Idaho which average 65%. After two months of lectures the students averaged 89%, just above the Idaho average score for the program.

The students in the class were more interested in horticulture at the end of the class than they were at the beginning. This may indicate the program is helping increase the desire to learn and thus the ability to become more knowledgeable in horticulture. It also indicates that the program is not turning people away from horticulture but inspiring life long learners.

Two final positive impacts of the Payette Valley Master Gardener Program are 1) student plans for special garden projects and 2) their knowledge of the purpose and role of Extension increased both by 25% by the end of the course. This means that 75% of the participants planned on completing the service hours over the summer and 80% of the students became more familiar with University of Idaho Extension and knew more about its operation, locations, and services.

The Payette Valley Master Gardener Program trained 30 new Master Gardeners in 2007. Assuming the 22 participants, with ideas for summer projects, complete their 30 hours of special volunteer service, they will have provided \$12,420 (\$18.00/hr) of services to the University of Idaho Extension and their communities. It costs approximately \$1,860 (\$30.00/hr plus food and travel costs for instructors) to provide the initial training, resulting in a \$10,560 benefit in a single year. In addition, these Master Gardeners are highly motivated, technically adept, and aware of recommendations of sustainable and IPM techniques. They are able to answer questions and diagnose problems in the Extension office, allowing the Extension educator to spend time working on other important programs. The volunteers averaged 8 hours a week during the summer in the Extension office answering questions, diagnosing problems, and writing articles for local papers. They answered 138 requests for diagnostics or identification on insects, diseases, and plants and wrote 7 articles on various interesting horticultural topics for Payette County. In addition, they are aware of, and can recommend, other County Extension offerings such as 4-H Youth Development and Extension Nutrition Programs.

For More Information

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