Hands-on workshops improve fruit tree knowledge

The Situation
Interest in local food production has increased due to the economy and the desire to have a secure source for personal consumption. The number of Farmers’ Markets has more than doubled throughout Idaho from 22 in 2001 to 46 in 2009 (Idaho State Department of Agriculture Market Development Division). These markets provide an outlet for locally produced products, providing income for producers.

Fruit tree production was high during the turn-of-the-century agriculture in Southern Idaho, and a variety of fruits can be successfully produced by homeowners and orchardists throughout the area.

New varieties, more rootstock choices, and the complexity of fruit tree pruning produces a need to provide up-to-date, research-based education for homeowners, landscape professionals, orchardists and Advanced Master Gardeners.

Our Response
A hands-on workshop to teach participants about fruit tree production and pruning was scheduled for mid-March in Gooding and for mid-April in Salmon. A 16-tree orchard in Gooding and a yard with 6 fruit trees in Salmon were used for the hands-on portion of the workshops. A variety of tree fruit types were available at both locations including apples, pears, peaches, plums, apricots and cherries.

The workshops began with a 2 hour presentation held at the local extension office (Gooding and Salmon). The presentation was given by Jo Ann Robbins, Horticulture Extension Educator, on tree fruit choice, planting, culture and pruning. The classroom presentation was followed by 2 to 3 hours of hands-on pruning at the tree sites. The 20 class participants in Gooding completing the hands-on section were divided into groups of 4 to 6. The 6 participants in Salmon worked in a single group. Robbins worked with each group discussing techniques and specific cuts on the trees. A group summary discussion in the orchards concluded the workshops.

Program Outcomes
Twenty participants of the 38 in the classroom presentation in Gooding who indicated they wished to complete the hands-on session were given a pre-test consisting of 9 questions at the beginning of the workshop. The six participants in Salmon were Advanced Master Gardeners and all took the pre-test. The same test was given at the conclusion of the hands-on pruning exercise.

The Gooding group consisted of small acreage landowners, landscape professionals and only 2 Master Gardeners. At the beginning of the workshop, they

Hands-on pruning in a local orchard allowed workshop participants to practice skills. Photo by Mario de Haro Marti, Extension Educator, Gooding County.
missed an average of 6 out of the 9 test questions. Their scores improved significantly after the workshop, with an average of only 2 of the 9 questions missed. They improved the most on why rootstocks are used for fruit trees, where fruiting buds are produced and when and how to thin fruit. They failed to learn about the appropriate type of training needed for dwarf or semi-dwarf apples. They were still unable to determine the proper amount of a specific formulation of fertilizer for a certain size of fruit tree.

The Advanced Master Gardeners in Salmon missed only 3 out of the 9 questions before the workshop, indicating a higher initial knowledge of fruit tree growing and pruning. These Master Gardeners have all completed the beginning Master Gardener class and have worked in various educational volunteer activities. After the workshop, they missed an average of 2 out of the 9 questions. They learned the most about when and how to thin fruit trees. However, they were still unable to determine the proper amount of a specific formulation of fertilizer for a certain size of fruit tree.

This program was well attended and successful from the standpoint of knowledge gained. Many positive comments and thanks were given by the participants at the conclusion of the program. Participants were also eager to remain on-site to complete pruning every tree.

The Future
This program will be repeated in future years. The largest challenge is finding an appropriate sized orchard with a variety of well cared for trees. The test results also indicate that future workshops should concentrate more on the calculation of the correct amount of fertilizer, given the size of the fruit tree and the formulation of the fertilizer product.

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