Sustainable garden exhibit offers interactive education to thousands

The Situation
By 2020, the growing population in Ada, Canyon and surrounding counties is expected to exceed 650,000 individuals. Population growth impacts our environment and inevitably limits access to open land and water resources, and puts constraints on municipal services. A survey conducted by the National Gardening Association (NGA) in 2008 of U.S. households nationwide discovered that only one out of five respondents gave their current lawn and landscape maintenance practices a passing “green” grade for sustainability.

Reaching out to teach sustainable garden and landscape practices to an ever growing metropolitan population could reduce not only landscape maintenance costs and yard waste, but also air and water pollution. It takes innovative and effective teaching methods to impact large audiences in a short period of time.

The Idaho Green Expo is a large annual event held in Boise, Idaho that promotes sustainability on all levels. University of Idaho (UI) Extension and the UI Boise Center were offered a high profile co-sponsorship by event organizers of the 2009 Green Expo if they could create a large indoor garden exhibit that would teach sustainability. Extension Horticulture educators and University of Idaho Master Gardener volunteers accepted the challenge.

Our Response
Extension Educators and volunteers designed a self-guided, interactive “Greening Your Garden” exhibit that was educational and attractive. Eight different tactile displays in the exhibit gave pertinent and sustainable information on: Idaho native plants, water efficient landscaping, edible landscapes, organic gardening, composting, greenhouse culture, pollinator protection, food preservation and small animal husbandry. The 1,200 square foot walk through exhibit was designed, constructed, and assembled for under $500 using donations, second hand items and loaned plants from local nurseries and industry partners.

Survey cards were designed to evaluate knowledge gained and behavioral changes planned after experiencing the exhibit’s interactive displays. Awareness of UI Extension prior to attending the event was also assessed.

Program Outcomes
Over 15,000 individuals from around the Treasure Valley and Southern Idaho attended the two-day Idaho Green Expo. Survey cards were collected randomly from 115 individuals walking through the “Greening Your Garden” exhibit. Survey tallies indicated that 100% of the respondents learned some-
thing new and would implement what they learned in their home landscapes and gardens. Water efficient landscaping, Idaho native plants, edible landscaping, composting and organic gardening were the most popular displays.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Popular Garden Display Areas</th>
<th>Visitors Learning Something New About Topic*</th>
<th>Visitors Planning to Implement New Practices*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water Efficient Landscaping</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho Native Plants</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composting</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edible Landscaping</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Gardening</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Visitors were encouraged to choose multiple responses, if applicable

Thirty-nine percent of all survey respondents did not have previous knowledge about UI Extension, while 38% claimed to know only a little bit. If these percentages are representative for all of the 15,000+ Idaho Green Expo attendees, this event may have introduced nearly 6,000 people to University of Idaho Extension for the first time! This alone is a significant outcome, and reason enough to continue researching this type of venue.

The Future
The magnitude of participation by the public in an event this size supplied educators with a captive audience ripe for engagement. It enabled educators and volunteers to learn new skills in large display and exhibit design, set up and maintenance; strengthened partnerships with cooperators; and introduced large numbers of people to UI Extension. This exhibit generated very positive comments from the public and event organizers; if invited to participate again, we educators would do so. This type of educational exhibit could be recreated for many other events with large attendance such as county fairs, garden schools and shows, and conferences.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors
University of Idaho Master Gardeners, Master Composters and Food Safety Advisors; Franz Witte Nursery; FarWest Garden Center; Zamzows; The Turf Company; Eco-Greenhouses; Pollinator Paradise; Boise Urban Garden School; Idaho Youth Ranch and Second Chance Building Materials.

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