UI Extension partners with local foods group to offer Backyard Agriculture classes

The Situation
For several years, there has been an increase in citizens who want to improve their gardening skills. There has also been an increased awareness by some that people need to become more self-sufficient when it comes to their food.

These two items led to the formation of the Salmon Local Foods Group. This group was initiated by Salmon Valley Stewardship. The group has expanded to include University of Idaho Extension, Sacajawea Center Heritage Garden, Lemhi County Farmer Market, Lemhi County Economic Development Association and several small business owners and concern citizens. As the group formed, a vision statement was developed. The group envisions a sustainable, local food network that:

- Benefits livestock operations and other producers by expanding markets and profits.
- Benefits consumer by providing better access to healthy food.
- Respects the interdependent relationship between growing practices and the health of the community, including people, wildlife and water.
- Enhances community self-reliance and food security for all residents.

As the group discussed the vision and projects related to the vision, the Master Gardener program was discussed. As the group examined this program, some challenges with it were identified:

- Only offered every other year in Lemhi County
- Too advanced for beginning gardeners
- Limited class size
- Cost

Our Response
Further discussion about potential topics led the group to expand to more areas than just gardening, all relating to food. It was decided to do a survey to determine what topics the citizens of Lemhi County would like to have as workshops. A list of 30 potential workshops was created. We also asked the length of class time, best time of day, weekday or weekend and costs. People could choose 12 topics as the group planned to offer one class per month. The survey was successful with 115 people responding.

Backyard Agriculture classes offer a variety of classes with new topics each time.

- Time commitment
- Volunteer commitment

The educational solution identified by the group was to host some basic gardening classes at a lower cost, lower time commitment and taught by local instructors.
The top 12 topics included:

- Fruit tree basics
- Extending the growing season
- Cheese and yogurt making
- Greenhouse construction
- Growing small fruits
- Composting
- Raising poultry
- Companion planting
- Saving your own seed
- Planting your garden
- Basic sausage making

It was determined that evenings during the week were best. Most people preferred a two hour class at a cost of $10. As the group reviewed the topics, local “experts” were identified. Many of these local “experts” were master gardeners. The group also tagged the series of classes “Backyard Agriculture” as they felt it best described the classes and would appeal to a large demographic.

Program Outcomes

Backyard Agriculture classes were determined and advertised on a quarterly basis. Topics were determined by the time of year and availability of presenter(s). The first class was offered on January 26, 2012 and continued on a monthly basis throughout the year. Average class attendance was 18 people. Comments from one class survey included:

- I will be a better gardener thanks to this class.
- Switch to raise beds and use row covers.
- I’ll try new things.

Overall 133 people participated in Backyard Agriculture classes with 36% of them attending more than one class.

As the group reviewed the success of Backyard Agriculture classes, the following plans for 2013 were made:

- Conduct survey of interest to determine what classes should be repeated and what new classes should be offered.
- Reduce the number of classes to seven, not hosting classes May thru September and December due to a lower participation during these months.
- Utilize radio, newspaper and flyers more effectively for advertising.