MASTER GARDENERS
TAKE THE "PLANT CLINIC"
TO MARKET

The Situation
Use of the plant clinic at the Extension office has increased since it opened in 1986. Master Gardeners currently operate the clinic on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays to help home owners with their gardening questions. The number of questions answered during plant clinic hours has increased to over 3000 during the growing season of 1995. Many home owners have expressed frustration that they can’t get into the clinic during its hours, and that Master Gardeners are often busy with other “walk-ins” or phone calls. At the same time, Market Gardeners at the Kootenai County Farmers Market have noticed an increase in production questions from shoppers at the market. While they recognize that helping customers is an important marketing tool, they are concerned they lose other customers who have to wait long periods of time while they try to answer production, canning and storage questions. The Saturday market is only open from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m..

Our Response
In the spring of 1995, we initiated discussion among the Master Gardeners and the Kootenai County Farmers Market Assoc. about setting up a plant clinic booth at the Saturday market. One Advanced Master Gardener was interested in working the booth; the Farmers Market Assoc. saw this arrangement as a way to expand their customer service, and perhaps draw more people to the market. Our Master Gardener scheduled the plant clinic for a Saturday per month from May through September. During August and September a Master Food Preserver shared the booth to answer canning and storing questions. The Farmers Market Assoc. provided the booth in a high traffic area of the market.
Achievements

- The Master Gardener and Master Food Preserver helped at least 100 people with home gardening and food preservation questions over the 5 Saturdays. Many of these gardeners had multiple questions. The Master Gardener spent up to 1/2 hour answering an individual’s questions.

- Home gardeners expressed appreciation for having the plant clinic during a convenient time and location (“they were coming to the market anyway”).

- The vendors at the market indicate that the plant clinic did help them with customer service. They could refer people to the clinic if they wanted answers on production practices, pest problems, harvesting, or storage and preservation.

- Vendors also indicated that on the days that the plant clinic was open, they noticed an increase in traffic at the market. They felt this was a good marketing tool for the market.

The Master Gardener program assistant indicates that the Saturday plant clinic was a great marketing tool for Extension. A number of new users of the weekday clinic indicated they learned of it while shopping at the market.

The Future

The Kootenai County Farmers Market Assoc. would like Master Gardeners to increase the number of market days they offer the clinic. Extension plans to encourage additional Master Gardeners to help with the clinic, so it can be open two Saturdays per month or more.

For More Information

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