

Search for Excellence in Consumer or Commercial Horticulture GARDENING IN THE AIR, VIRTUAL GARDEN DAY

Educational Objectives

Garden days are a popular fall and spring event for many gardeners to attend. The average number of attendees of a garden day is 120 participants. Due to the Covid-19 guidelines, University of Illinois Extension (UIE) staff and Iowa State University (ISU) Extension staff were unable to offer their annual in-person garden day events. The planning committee felt that it was important to continue to offer educational opportunities for the public. In addition, the committee felt that overall Extension outreach could be expanded by offering bi-state virtual garden day events.

Our objectives:

- 1) Continue to offer popular, multi-topic garden day events
- 2) Form a partnership between University of Illinois Extension and Iowa State University Extension by offering bi-state gardening events.
- 3) Increase number of participants by offering events virtually
- 4) Deliver educational programs
- 5) These program efforts follow both Universities guidelines regarding direct in-person programming during quarantine.
- 6) Fiscal prudence to eliminate travel expenses for both Universities.
- 7) As a result of each presentation, participants will make better informed decisions. In addition participants will make at least one practice change, or implement one new practice.

Program Activities

Gardening in the Air, virtual Saturday garden days were planned by five team members: Bruce Black, Martha Smith, and Jennifer Fishburn, UIE horticulture educators; Cynthia Haynes, ISU horticulture specialist; and Tracy Mulliken, UIE program coordinator. This committee decided to offer two consecutive Saturday morning events from 9 a.m. – noon CDT in fall 2020. Each event would offer three topical tracks. Each track would offer three hourly specific topics relating to the track. Presenters were asked to prepare a 45-minute presentations and allow 15 minutes for question and answers.

A bi-state conference posed challenges including which state would host web registration, which virtual platform would be utilized, who would be invited as presenters, and which state would send out evaluations.

Each Virtual Saturday program participant would be able to select three of the nine presentations to engage in as they were presented live. This meant there were many pieces to pull together a successful event. Zoom links would need to be scheduled by UIE staff since we would be using UIE Zoom licenses. Each session would need to have a moderator. With approval of presenter, sessions would be recorded to be closed captioned and posted on a YouTube channel.

Our fall virtual Saturday gardening events were a success, so our committee planned and offered two winter virtual Saturday gardening events.

Teaching Methods

Three topic specific tracks of presentations were offered for each garden day event. Each track offered three hourly topics for a total of nine presentations.

We utilized the UIE Zoom platform. UIE hosted web registration, scheduled Zoom meetings and emailed out session links. ISU would send out evaluations using Qualtrics. Presenters delivered PowerPoint presentations or pre-recorded videos, followed by question and answer sessions. To make winter session programs more interactive, polls and the chat box were used during discussion. Digital handouts were provided for 30 of 36 presentations.

All but two presentations were recorded. After closed captioning the presentations, each recording was uploaded to a private YouTube playlist. Hyperlinks were provided to all registered attendees.

Results

Number of participants:

- October 3, 221 registered
- October 10, 258 registered
- January 31, 636 registered
- February 6, 749 registered

Majority of participants were from Illinois and Iowa. Overall, we had participants representing 25 other states, Poland and Canada.

Both fall and winter gardening events included 17 UIE faculty and educators; and 13 ISU faculty and educators. In addition, three presenters were staff at Minnesota, Tennessee and Western Illinois Universities. This expanded the reach of expertise. Eleven UIE educators were session moderators. The UIE marketing committee created materials and promoted the events statewide. Committee members also received training from Illinois Information technology (IT) to effectively use Zoom and troubleshoot possible issues.

Five-month follow-up data:

- 76.5% plan to watch up to nine of the YouTube recordings, with 5.5% planning to watch 21 or more.
- 61.1% attended at least two garden days.
- 95.3% of respondents had some previous garden or plant experience.
- 82.2% of respondents were Extension volunteers, 5.2% were teachers, & 6.0% have a plant occupation.
- In answer to "How has Gardening in the Air helped you this year," participants said:
 - My confidence in making gardening decisions increased. (17.7%)
 - I did something new or made a change related to my garden. (16.6%)
 - I shared information with friends or family. (21.5%)
 - I used information from the series in my job or volunteer work. (11.1%)
 - I plan to use the information or do something differently this growing season. (32.3%)
- Specific participant quotes (*see attached #1*)

Impact Statement

Due to budgetary issues, offering this virtually saved approximately \$510 in hotel expenses and \$7,906 in mileage expenses overall. Looking at travel time offering these programs virtually meant 227 hours of windshield time was eliminated resulting in approx. \$6,810 saved in salary expense. For a total savings of \$15,226, in addition we did not incur facilities rental fees. (*see attached #2*)

Open-ended follow-up evaluation data:

- **Participants reported high rates of learning/knowledge gain.**
 - 80% reported that they learned something in response to the question “What did you learn from the presentation(s) that you attended?”
 - 75% referred to specific learning/knowledge gain
- **Respondents appreciated the high quality of the presentations.**
 - A majority of respondents --58% -- mentioned some aspect of presentation/content quality as something they liked most about the event: specific content/presentation(s), quality of speaker(s), or information quality.
 - 25% mentioned an aspect of information quality
 - 24% mentioned specific content/presentation(s)
 - 23% mentioned referenced speaker quality, either generally or for a specific speaker
- **Topic selection was popular**
 - Participants appreciated the topic selection, with 19% mentioning it specifically, either in conjunction with or separate from the 24% referencing specific content.
- **Possible areas for improvement**
 - Most issues mentioned as “least liked” only had a relatively small number of mentions each.
 - Variety of tech issues mentioned, but most seemed minor (8%)
 - Lengthen breaks (8%)

Evaluation - method

A Qualtrics follow-up survey was emailed to 1,857 participants. Participation was voluntary. As each day was a separate registration, those who signed up for multiple days received the eval multiple times. Survey was completed by 815 participants. The response rate was 43.9%.

As a result of the fall survey, we addressed the lack of breaks that were indicated by participants. For the January and February events, we incorporated 15-minute breaks and asked moderators to end sessions on time. Additional questions that might not have been answered live, were copied from the chat; answered by the presenter and shared electronically with participants. To mitigate technology issues, participants received a “How to Connect to Zoom” document and two Extension staff also were available to troubleshoot.

A five-month Qualtrics impact survey was emailed to 477 fall participants. Survey was completed by 149 participants. The response rate was 31.2%.

Due to the success of this program, we are planning a fall 2021 session utilizing the format changes for winter sessions. Topics will be determined utilizing the suggestions from the winter follow-up survey.