

Successful Transition to Virtual Horticulture & Gardening Workshops

Search for Excellence in Consumer or Commercial Horticulture Award

Education Objectives:

This virtual gardening programming's primary objective is to provide current, research-based content in a method that consumers can safely and easily access. Considering potential barriers to participation, multiple virtual workshops are structured to be offered at different times. By offering workshops on different days and times, increased live access availability is provided for the consumer. Upon completion of each workshop, participants gain knowledge and confidence in horticulture and gardening topics. This may lead to success in managing their garden and landscape. In addition to new horticulture and gardening-specific knowledge, consumers also experience an increased understanding of Extension's various resources and services, including avenues to access these resources.

Program Activities:

In June of 2020, an initial online horticulture workshop, "Maintaining A Treasure Valley Lawn," was delivered via Zoom. As the seasons progressed and marketing techniques were expanded, such as collaborated social media marketing, emphasis on targeted e-mails to specific interest groups, and increased visualization in a monthly newsletter, more virtual workshop registrations occurred. By continually structuring and offering these workshops, clientele could gain interest and awareness of upcoming workshops. An exit survey, provided at the end of each workshop, allows for collecting additional topics that consumers may want addressed in future educational workshops.

These workshops have been marketed through multiple channels and platforms to inform consumers based on their personal preferences. By reaching out to established community partnerships, these virtual workshops are shared via social media platforms by more than ten community entities, expanding marketing efforts without the need for advertising funds. Also, upcoming workshops are structured in advance and shared with a captured audience at the end of the workshop to allow additional advertising and recruitment.

Teaching Methods:

To provide the opportunity for individuals to access current, research-based content on gardening and horticulture, topic programming is developed specifically for those new or returning to gardening and interested in increasing personal knowledge. Besides structuring topics of interest to consumers, the consumer's level of knowledge and skill were also considered in selecting and designing different workshops. For example, a three-part series beginning with "Plan the Garden, Preserve the Harvest!", continuing to "Gardening 101", and concluding with "Gardening 102" provides a scaffold approach to the learning series. Simultaneously, this allows clientele to attend any combination of workshops, or a single workshop based on personal experience and desire for educational topics.

This program was designed as monthly virtual workshops to accommodate Idaho's COVID-19 restrictions for group gatherings and social-distancing guidelines. By offering these workshops virtually, the opportunity to reach larger audiences has been dramatically expanded, and health-based safety barriers to participating have been eliminated. Many workshops were presented twice to provide access to individuals who could attend a workshop virtually in the evening or during the noon hour.

One to two days prior to each workshop, a reminder email is sent to participants. Linked to this reminder is a Zoom meeting/webinar link and handout which includes hyperlinks to research-based materials that will be mentioned in the presentation.

Results:

To date, nine unique workshop topics covering lawn care, soils, growing herbs, microgreens, harvesting & storage of vegetables, vermicomposting, and garden planning & preservation have been presented. Many virtual workshops are offered twice, resulting in a total of 15 workshops hosted via Zoom.

To allow for evaluation of programming structure and implementing new strategies, virtual workshops were not offered in August and September. In August, adaptation for future implementation was strategized, and in September, the promotion of the upcoming October workshop took place. All workshops were offered free for clientele except for “Give the Gift of Herbs”, which required a registration fee for materials.

By January of 2021, continual marketing strategies and evaluation of potential interest topics based on gardening and horticulture have been provided to the public. Zoom-based workshops now exceed 100 participants for each workshop offered, resulting in more than 150 participants per program workshop. Since January 2021, seven separate workshops have been offered.

Impact Statement:

Marketing for a virtual workshop can be successful by collaborating with local community partners and their social media platforms. While marketing continues in traditional methods through a monthly newsletter, Extension calendar, and listserv email blasts indicating county programming, the registration data collected from participants indicates that many individuals obtain workshop registration information from social media.

Strategies implemented on social media include creating a calendar event and adding participating community partners as co-hosts. The purpose of adding co-hosts is to expand the reach to those individuals following the community partners' social media. This technique greatly expanded the outreach of these workshops. An email is sent directly to community partners providing an electronic copy of the flyer for use in their newsletters. In addition, a link to the flyer was made available for community partners to share on social media platforms easily. This strategy requires that workshop dates and materials be completed at least one month before the workshop to allow community partners time to include information in their marketing.

An additional strategy of offering cross programming, in an example below, horticulture and Family & Consumer Sciences, increased attendance in the workshop. This allowed each educator, serving different program areas and counties, to build a series of more advanced topics that followed the initial workshop. Planning a workshop series allows for promoting upcoming workshops to a captured audience with varying levels of interest, knowledge, confidence, and skill. This successful transition to virtual programming and marketing has and will continue to be shared with other educators. Step-by-step trainings have been offered to colleagues, highlighting these effective design and implementation techniques, which continues to expand the outreach capability for Extension Educators to reach consumers.

Evaluation Method:

A post-workshop survey was shared with participants one week following one particular workshop. This survey intended to gauge participant learning and planned action following their participation in the workshop. Of the 157 unique contacts that attended, 29 completed the follow-up post-survey, which contained thirteen questions. Listed in Table 1 and Table 2, included in supplemental materials, are mean scores of the evaluation outcomes, with the most significant mean score increases for understanding and confidence shown.

Some workshop participant responses include:

- The class was well presented and covered a wide range of topics that are valuable to beginners or a refresher for experienced gardeners and preservers.
- Thank you for providing digital resources I can access in the future as I'm truly a beginner and won't remember everything covered in class.
- My knowledge on these topics was improved by the class. My skills on the topics will improve as I put them into practice, and I have successes in the garden.
- Appreciate your preparation, sincerity, all the answers to questions and your enthusiasm. Well planned, motivating and educational presentation.
- Thanks for sharing across borders. I'm from Pendleton Oregon.

This programming method is ongoing due to the successful attendance and positive feedback received from these virtual workshops. As workshop participants desire more in-depth content, additional content-specific programming will continue to be offered virtually. Examples of currently scheduled workshops include harvesting and storing garden vegetables, fall vegetable gardening, and preparing the garden for winter. As participants continue to attend and participate in evaluation, content topic workshops will be adapted to meet the needs of consumers.