

## **Using Public Relations to Reach Horticulture Enthusiasts**

### **Narrative**

#### **A. County Situation**

White county is a rural county in central Arkansas with a population of 78,753. It is a county with a diverse agriculture that includes livestock (48,000 head of beef cattle) poultry, row crops (over 90,000 acres), and horticulture (blackberries, blueberries, sod, strawberries, turf and public/private landscape). According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, the market value of agriculture products sold was over \$124 million in White county, \$1,344,000 of that was made up of horticulture commodities. Of the total employed individuals in White county, less than 7 % are “natural resource based”.

#### **B. Public Relations**

Local planning committees have frequently identified a lack of agricultural awareness as a key issue in White county and its adjoining counties. Many homeowners and county agents across the state have a lack of knowledge in dealing with common landscape problems. Since horticulture is far reaching in its potential audience, a plan was developed to help broaden the knowledge base for clientele both in horticulture related topics and the Extension program.

The pandemic opened up new opportunities for us to extend our reach using Zoom to horticulture enthusiasts across the nation.

#### **C. Program Execution**

Intensive programmatic efforts were conducted/coordinated in the following areas: On site and on farm horticulture demonstrations, Pollinator education, Lectures by Agent, Master Gardener volunteers and Community Garden outreach, and Social media platforms.

Demonstrations are an important key to successful educational programs. They show the university research in real world situations and they help teach people through hands-on learning, not just lectures. Another key factor is that they allow the audience to see the agent getting real work done alongside the clientele, which makes agents more relatable.

The COVID pandemic required agents to find new and innovative ways to reach our audience for educational meetings and workshops. The Brown Bag Lecture Series on Zoom provided horticulture education for people from across the state and nation. We started in April of 2020 on Wednesdays at noon.

My target audience is the general public and Master Gardeners with an interest in commercial and homeowner horticulture.

Facebook groups include:

My county agent page: <https://www.facebook.com/UAEX.WhiteCountyAgriculture/>

White County Master Gardener Page: <https://www.facebook.com/WCMG1997/>

Searcy Pollinator Friendly Page: <https://www.facebook.com/SearcyPollinatorFriendly/>

Searcy Tree Board: <https://www.facebook.com/Searcy-Tree-Board-271545119535832/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/SherriSanders11>

#### **D. Results and Evaluation**

Collectively, these social media platforms reach an average of over 14,870 direct and indirect contacts monthly, with some months reaching over 20,000 contacts. Content is also available on the White County Extension Website <https://www.uaex.edu/counties/white/>. Analytics and personal testimony revealed that clientele from 26 states and 9 countries have benefited from knowledge gained through my social media educational efforts.

Social Media platforms have generated 424,456 indirect contacts and 143,342 direct contacts in Horticulture programming.

This exposure has allowed the agent an opportunity to reach a non-traditional audience and to make them more aware of the Cooperative Extension Service and its horticulture resources and other valuable programs.

Twenty-five Brown Bag sessions have been utilized since April 2020 with total combined live participants of 6239 people and 4196 downloads of the recording after the presentations. We have 1295 (unduplicated) people on our email list that have shown interest in and wanted to be included in each week's invitation. All videos are made available on our county website for people to watch later. The Brown Bag Lectures are still going strong as of print date of this application. The requests for additional sessions are received daily.