

Search for Excellence in Consumer or Commercial Horticulture

Sherri Sanders, Arkansas

Using Social Media and Boots on the Ground to Educate the Public on Horticulture

Educational Objectives:

The FY2020 horticulture subcommittee of the White County Extension Council developed their top 5 priorities for the agent to address:

#1 Continued work in Agriculture Awareness, especially for youth. Continued work to help inspire youth to learn to love gardening.

#2 Continued education for small farmers to become more profitable with selling on the local level through USDA programs, farm to school initiatives, farmers markets, etc. Food deserts in the county and in the state were mentioned as a priority. The need for healthy produce and the people to grow it in those areas for others or to learn to grow it themselves is important.

#3 Continued education and support for beekeeping.

#4 Outreach is important. The group mentioned the efforts on social media (Facebook, Twitter, email and webpage) but they also encouraged to keep the farm visits and one on one consultation as they are vital to teach clientele.

#5 Continued support and work to promote the safe but needed use of pesticides in commercial and homeowner horticulture. Emphasis was placed on the new insects which have caused economic distress in small fruits (Spotted Wing Drosophila, Broad Mites, Red Berry Mites, etc.)

Program Activities:

Experiential learning is the process of learning through experience. Hands-on learning can be a form of experiential learning and has proven to be successful in retention of subject matter. Gleaning information from others, with proven experience, can be invaluable to our clientele. Likewise, our seasoned audience have learned from the younger generation too. That is our goal through this program – to create a reciprocal learning environment for the public.

Intensive programmatic efforts were conducted/coordinated for the last three years in the following areas:

Pollinator education: The Searcy Pollinator Friendly committee was formed in 2016 since the city is the first in the state to receive this recognition. Sanders serves as ex-officio on the committee, designated by the mayor. Sanders manages the Facebook page for the group and helps with all educational efforts. In 2018, White county hosted a free, three-day beekeeping course designed to teach clientele how to begin keeping honeybees safely and successfully at home. There were 109 attendees, representing 11 counties.

Lectures by Agent, Master Gardener volunteers and Community Garden outreach: Since 2017, over 9000 White county students in 11 different schools enjoyed learning about horticulture from Master

Gardener volunteers during the school year. Over 40 units were taught by 15 Master Gardeners in area schools and the Downtown Searcy Victory Garden. The topics presented were: Soil Microbes, Organic Gardening, Crop rotation, Honeybee, Seeds, Backyard Birds, Water Conservation, Butterflies and Herbs. Programs were offered to all public and private schools in White county. Teachers and administration called to the Extension office to schedule each event. This was a hit during the school year. The teachers, students and the Master Gardeners are encouraged about the last three years of results and look forward to continuing this program. The youth have a better appreciation and better understanding of gardening and its rewards. One elementary school has started and bird feeding/butterfly garden because of the Master Gardener programs. The high school has developed a new fruit and vegetable “outdoor classroom” garden called, Beyond the Doors.

Social Media platforms: Many people have a thirst for knowledge and turn to social media for information. One of the most significant ways we can engage with clientele is educating them with important facts and news about sustainable agriculture. By providing informative content social media accounts are turned into digital classrooms by using live video for short presentations and live events. Quick/short videos- allows agent to create our own or to utilize third-party apps or Facebook pages, like Bee Friendly, to add information accompanied with fun animations. These are popular on Facebook and Twitter as well and can catch your audience’s attention quickly. We also advertise upcoming workshops and educational programs. Since 2018 the Searcy Pollinator Friendly committee Facebook page, White county Master Gardener Facebook page, UAEX White County Horticulture agent Facebook/Twitter page and the Orchard Project Facebook page have generated 1,324,456 indirect contacts and 543,332 direct contacts in Sustainable agriculture programming.

Zoom: 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.

Twenty five 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.

Teaching Methods:

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. Please see supporting documents for details.

Results: A summary of the evaluations of more than 4100 respondents revealed:

89% of participants know the importance of soil testing, scouting and crop rotation in the garden

78% learned at least one new technique in fruit tree thinning and pruning

49% of the adults committed to planting an “extra row” in their garden to help feed those less fortunate

92% of youth have learned to identify pollinators and their importance

72% said they would try to plant more fruits and vegetables in their home garden

63% said they would like to raise butterflies as a hobby

93% success rate with the participation in take home seed propagation activity

Impact Statement:

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>

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.

Evaluation:

Education was delivered through a multi-platform strategy for adult and youth learners. An indicator of participant engagement in live/virtual educational programs is interaction. Participants submitted 126 comments and questions during the live videos.

96% of respondents reported that they planned to share educational information learned through the live videos.

94% of respondents stated they thought the best part of the program was the “hands-on” pruning of actual trees.

78% reported that they planned to adopt practices shared through workshops.

The Brown Bag Lectures series evaluation is include in the supporting documents.