

Educational objectives

Good Growing uses multiple platforms to provide homeowners and growers with research-based horticultural information and best practices that result in more sustainable care of their landscapes and crops. Through the strategic use of written, audio, and visual communication methods, the team has been able to reach a broader, more diverse audience.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique opportunity for the Good Growing team to meet the needs of people spending more time gardening and working in their landscapes. This has helped propel Good Growing into an important source of horticultural information in Illinois and beyond.

Program activities

Good Growing originated as a local news column for the Quincy Herald-Whig newspaper in Quincy, Illinois. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Good Growing has evolved into a multi-faceted educational outreach effort featuring print media, a blog, podcasts, newsletter, videos, and webinars, positioning it as a modern source of Extension information.

Teaching methods and Results

Newspapers/Traditional Media

Newspaper and traditional media outreach remains the foundation of Good Growing and drives weekly content development. Each week, a team member writes an article for distribution to local media. Good Growing is now distributed weekly to newspapers and other local media in 18 counties covering west-central Illinois, providing timely horticultural information to residents.

Good Growing Blog

In addition, to distributing articles to print and other media, these articles are also used as blog posts. Unrestricted by space limitations, blogs allow for more in-depth articles, the use of pictures, and web links. The Good Growing Blog has become an important source for obtaining horticultural information. It is the most widely viewed University of Illinois Extension blog, totaling over 595,000 views since 2020.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, people were unexpectedly spending more time at home. During this time, many people with little or no experience began gardening. The team realized many people were in need of gardening resources. In response, the team developed the *Starting a Garden* series. This series walked readers through a year of vegetable gardening, from planning, caring for plants through harvest. Over a span of two months, 26 articles were produced and have been viewed over 65,000 times.

Good Growing Podcast

To help disseminate horticultural and gardening information through an audio format, the team developed the weekly Good Growing Podcast in March 2020. Like print and blog articles, the podcast covers a wide variety of topics. The conversational format of the podcast allows for more in-depth and nuanced discussions. Guests are frequently brought in to talk about their areas of expertise and have included Extension educators and specialists, and industry experts. In October 2020, the team started creating a video version ('videocast') of the podcast to allow for the use of visuals and make it more accessible.

Podcasts/'videocasts' are recorded using Zoom, edited in Adobe Premiere Pro, and posted online to SoundCloud for listeners to download or stream. The podcast's feed is linked to major podcast platforms

such as iTunes, Google Podcast, Spotify, and other third-party podcast apps. The ‘videocasts’ are uploaded to the University of Illinois Extension Horticulture YouTube page and curated in a Good Growing playlist.

As of March 2023, 135 podcasts and 89 ‘videocasts’ have been produced and have been played over 62,000 times (combined).

Good Growing Webinars

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the team offered webinars to replace their traditional in-person presentations. These presentations allowed the team to interact with local clientele and people throughout Illinois, the U.S., and internationally. In total, 18 webinars ranging from container gardening, beneficial insects, holiday plant care, and creating bird habitat were provided. Over 1,750 people attended the live webinars. The webinars were recorded and posted to YouTube; and have received over 88,000 views.

How-to-videos

Accommodating visual learners, the team has also developed short how-to videos demonstrating horticultural practices. These videos are frequently used to support blogs, webinars, and podcasting efforts. For example, videos have been created on how to plant garlic and how to divide irises. These technical videos were then embedded into the corresponding blog articles.

Additionally, light-hearted how-to-videos were developed to complement technical webinars to give them a ‘hands-on feel.’ For example, videos for making outdoor holiday planters, kissing balls, evergreen gnomes, and wreaths supplemented a webinar on winter pruning.

In total, sixteen how-to-videos have been created, which have been viewed over 51,000 times.

Weekly Email

To streamline the dissemination of online Good Growing content, the team has created an email distribution list. A weekly email is sent to subscribers and includes all Good Growing content developed that week (blog, podcast, videos, etc.). It also includes a section, From the Archives, directing readers to previously published but still relevant content.

The team regularly works to grow this email list by offering multiple avenues for subscription, such as links at the end of each blog article, social media posts, and inviting program participants to subscribe. Currently, there are 1,336 subscribers to the email.

Evaluation and Impacts

In the summer of 2020 and spring of 2023, the team sought to evaluate Good Growing’s impact. A Qualtrics survey was created and distributed to subscribers, listeners, and readers. A summary of the results follows:

- All respondents indicated they had used information from the Good Growing Blog and Podcast in some way.
 - Added to their knowledge (89% blog, 81% podcast)
 - *“Thank you for providing this information in a fun and practical way. I enjoy learning about new things each week and have slowly increased my knowledge to make my own garden better and share what I have learned with others.”*

- Managed landscape more successfully (65% blog, 61% podcast)
 - *“I have developed my garden and know why to plant where and how to care for them better.”*
 - Addressed a problem (48% blog, 39% podcast)
 - *“Better managed pests. Started a new garden.”*
 - Saved resources (29% blog, 30% podcast)
- 100 percent of respondents have or would consider referring Good Growing to a friend
 - *“The articles are very well written and they make the science very easy to understand.”*
 - All individuals affiliated with Extension as volunteers or employees (72) indicated they would/have used this information in their work
 - *“I find Good Growing to be so delightful because even though I feel like I have quite a bit of knowledge and experience behind me there's always something to be learned and the staff always presents that information in a fun and non-judgmental way. I feel like it's accessible to everyone!”*

The team utilizes Qualtrics evaluations during Good Growing webinars. Overall, attendees indicate an increase in knowledge of the topics presented. Participants are also asked what types of information they would like to learn about in future educational efforts. This feedback informs the creation of subsequent webinars and other Good Growing content (blogs, podcasts, etc.). The following are some responses from the evaluations:

- *“This webinar was fantastic. It was very informative. I learned a great deal and am planning to watch it again. I've paid for webinars that weren't nearly as good as this one. I hope my tax dollars are going towards this program. It is worth every penny. Thank you.”*
- *“Excellent presentation. Obviously well researched. Lots of good details that can be shared in conversations.”*