

IMPACT

University of Idaho
Extension

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Making gardening information accessible in the digital age

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension partners with the Idaho Statesman newspaper to digitally expand gardening information to millions through social media channels.

The Situation

Money spent on home gardening has risen since 2015. Data taken from the current Annual National Gardening Survey shows spending on gardening and garden related items topped \$36 billion in 2016, with a significant rise (6%) in the do-it-yourself (DIY) category. These statistics also coincide with the Garden Media Group's 2016 Garden Trends Report that traces a strong connection between backyard outdoor living with the love of nature and the natural world. The outdoor lifestyle has always been a powerful draw for people moving to Boise (Ada County) and the surrounding Treasure Valley. Boise is experiencing yet another growth spurt in its population — a 7 percent increase occurred from 2006 to 2010 and a 10.67 percent increase from 2010 to 2015. This population surge means more homes are being constructed with landscapes and backyards installed to further gardening endeavors.

Along with spending on gardens and landscapes, new and seasoned gardeners are hungry for unbiased horticultural information and advice that will help ensure success. Also, millennials tend to be urbanites who don't just garden as a pleasant activity but more for the practical purpose of eating healthier and promoting sustainability. It has been observed recently in the UI Extension, Ada County office that millennials have less time for traditional classes and are requesting more online information and resources.



Katherine Jones questions Advanced Master Gardener Debbie Courson Smith on raised beds. Video still credit: Katy Moeller.

Traditionally, University of Idaho Extension's approach for disseminating information and education has always been face-to-face and phone tutoring, group classes or workshops, and newsletters or newspaper articles; however, during the last 17 years, various internet sites, channels and mobile applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and others are giving UI Extension clientele greater access to gardening information. Two years ago, Ada County Master Gardeners took advantage of this new way of reaching audiences with gardening information by establishing a presence on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest, and observed that audience use of these channels from 2015 to 2016 increased by 243 percent, 150 percent and 33 percent, respectively. Using various channels to distribute information and resources in the digital age makes sense. It's what people desire — brief, to the point, fun and less formal educational venues, with a growing preference for videos.

Our Response

Considering the growing demand for fast, factual, digital horticultural advice, Ada County Master Gardener volunteers approached the largest local news publication in the state, the *Idaho Statesman*, with the idea of producing weekly garden features that would include news articles and videos for their digital e-newsletter, YouTube channel and other social media connections. The idea was well-received as the *Idaho Statesman* was seeking to expand their offerings of local garden information based on consumer demand. Master Gardeners worked with local newspaper reporters to tailor gardening topics for the widest possible audience, keeping information basic and practical.

Program Outcomes

A front-page feature news article was written about the University of Idaho's Master Gardener (MG) Program introducing the MG volunteers and their free plant diagnostic clinic. A shorter online version of the article with accompanying video showing the Master Gardeners at work launched a 32-week MG gardening series of articles and videos on a variety of topics. The newspaper articles were published each Saturday and sent to 48,000 subscribers or 1,536,000 potential readers for the 32-week series.

The online version of each weekly article, accompanied by a video, was disseminated through the *Idaho Statesman's* e-newsletter and social media accounts. The *Idaho Statesman's* e-newsletter reached an estimated 45,000 per week or 1,440,000 total article readers for the series, while clicks to the MG video links numbered roughly 12,000 per week or 384,000 potential viewers during the entire 32-week series. (Exact viewer numbers for all of the *Idaho Statesman's* associated digital products were unavailable as they are considered proprietary information.) In addition, the National Extension.org Master Gardener Facebook page, that reaches a global audience of 120,000 per posting, also made use of the MG articles and videos. Total numbers are unknown for the digital products that were repurposed by bloggers or used online by various news sites/aggregators.

The *Idaho Statesman* received hundreds of positive comments about the format used and the valuable local information that was shared by the Master Gardeners. The *Idaho Statesman's* news director considered the MG articles and videos highly successful and useful to their audiences. While the 32-week MG gardening series ran, more face-to-face visits, telephone calls and emails from the public were logged at the UI Extension, Ada County MG Plant Diagnostic Clinic.

The Future

Not only did the *Idaho Statesman* indicate a desire to continue the partnership with the University of Idaho's Master Gardeners in 2017, but we found the astronomical numbers of

people reached online shows that using social media channels to educate and inform greatly extends the outreach of our university. Also, it is a great way to highlight and validate the skills and expertise of Master Gardener Program volunteers. In summary, using digital venues goes well beyond the classroom and face-to-face contacts; it showcases the University of Idaho and its educational programs to a world-wide audience.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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