

Flexible online Idaho Master Gardener Program reaches statewide audience

AT A GLANCE

The Idaho Master Gardener Program digital development combined with University of Idaho's Canvas educational platform brings the program to all Idaho residents.

The Situation

Traditional Idaho Master Gardener Program have been delivered to students in urban areas of Idaho during the winter. Winter travel in Idaho is hazardous. Each county offered their own classes and educators would travel to the counties, presenting in three or four locations each week. Daytime programs made it difficult for most working people to attend the classes. Nighttime programs limited classes to those who could drive at night on hazardous roads.

Each class was three hours long to get through the extensive master gardener curriculum during the January-April timeframe. This made it difficult for people with young families and the aging population to sit through an entire class.

Additionally, many rural counties do not have educators with the time or expertise to run an Idaho Master Gardener Program. These situations have made it difficult for residents in rural counties to receive master gardener training and rural UI Extension offices in counties to gain the benefit of master gardeners.

Our Response

From 2021-2023 several eastern Idaho counties combined into one Idaho Master Gardener Program and



Idaho Master Gardeners in Bonneville County promote gardening and raise funds for educational activities.

the three-hour classes were presented on Zoom and recorded and edited for students to review. As the program progressed more counties from other regions were invited to join the program. Interested residents could register for classes either in their own counties or through the program in Bonneville County. In addition to class and volunteer hours, many counties also implemented hands-on labs for such topics as pruning and grafting.

In late 2023, University of Idaho purchased a Canvas license for off-campus digital program delivery. This allowed educators to offer the program where all the educational material could be accessed asynchronously at the students' convenience and still maintain course integrity.

To make the program easier to access, the three-hour presentations were broken into 15-30-minute topic videos. Canvas gives educators the ability to see who has completed all the assignments to meet the minimum certification requirements.

Building strong relationships with master gardeners is key to program success. The eastern Idaho program held weekly one-hour Zoom sessions to answer questions and dive deeper into topics beyond the Idaho Master Gardener Handbook.

In 2024, the Idaho Master Gardener Program became available statewide. Counties could either run their own programs or have participants join the eastern Idaho offering.

Program Outcomes

From 2021-2024, there were 18 Idaho counties and two students from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, that participated in the online Idaho Master Gardener Program with a total of 351 beginning students. Several counties participated in multiple years. Eighteen times there were five or fewer students from any one given

county. In 2024, three counties held their own classes as a group of high-altitude counties using online Idaho Master Gardener materials.

The Future

It is important to keep the Idaho Master Gardener Program flexible and county centric. There are state minimum class and volunteer service requirements to qualify for master gardener certification. Counties have the option of requiring more, but not less, for their master gardener program completers.

Program developers will need to work with county UI Extension educators to help them learn how this program can be implemented in their counties. Those counties who do not have the time or personnel to run the Idaho Master Gardener Program may still have county residents join with the eastern Idaho program for registration and certification. Those students can then do their volunteer time in their resident county.

University of Idaho Extension Publishing is working with class presenters to fine-tune and polish the educational videos.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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26-24-rpatterson-master-gardener • 10/24