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Finding Hidden Partnerships to Create a Teaching Garden

Stephen B. Renquist

Oregon State University Extension Service, steve.renquist@oregonstate.edu



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Finding Hidden Partnerships to Create a Teaching Garden

Abstract

Finding sources of funding to create a teaching or demonstration garden for Extension educational purposes was difficult, especially during a downturn in the economy. The horticulture agent and Master Gardeners from Douglas County Oregon discovered successful fund raising could be accomplished not by asking for donations but by finding partners who would see the project as a means to achieve mutual goals. Extension agents are accustomed to being organizers in the community, and this process of creating meaningful partnerships can be a long-term source of support for our programs.

Stephen B. Renquist

Horticulture Agent
Oregon State University Extension
Roseburg, Oregon
steve.renquist@oregonstate.edu

Introduction

Among Master Gardener program coordinators in Oregon there is a common belief that a well balanced program would include a strong winter training schedule, a plant clinic to answer gardening questions from the public, an educational outreach series in the community, and a location to teach or demonstrate good gardening practices. In 2000, after arriving in Douglas County Oregon, I found no public location to teach and demonstrate current horticultural trends, clearly limiting the Master Gardener and Horticultural Extension impact in the community.

Most Master Gardener-led demonstration garden projects have typically been funded by local plant sale efforts and through donations by local businesses. Our project was no different. However, the plan for our garden was ambitious, and we needed other sources of funds to complete our plan. After unsuccessful attempts to use our educational purpose to secure additional funding from foundations and other competitive grant agencies, we decided we would need to be more creative to finance our project.

Community Organizer

Our vision for the garden was based on demonstrating science-based sustainable gardening practices that promote recycling of organic wastes, judicious use of horticultural inputs, efficient water use, and the right plants for Southwest Oregon.

Early in our project we decided it was more important to share the vision of the garden and our teaching message than to ask for money. By sharing that vision at every opportunity, we eventually drew people and other organizations to our project and received support in ways that we never imagined at the start.

As we shared our ideas we began to take on the role of a community organizer, a role with a long history in Extension. An article in *Journal of Extension*, "Rousing the People on the Land: The Roots of the Educational Organizing Tradition in Extension Work" (Peters, 2002) talked about the role of Extension agents as organizers in their communities. Scott Peters concluded "there was, indeed, a mainstream tradition of organizing in the first few decades of cooperative Extension work that was deeply educational and that involved a positive, constructive politics that was (and is) appropriate for Extension educators to engage in." He also included an excerpt from a publication released in the 1930s on the aim of community organizing.

The aim of community organization is to develop relationships between groups and individuals that will enable them to act together in creating and maintaining facilities and agencies through which they may realize their highest values in the common welfare of all members of the community (Sanderson & Polson 1939: 76).

Hidden Partnerships

While the horticulture agent and the Master Gardeners were out surveying groups and individuals to discover what they thought about our idea of developing a teaching site, we discovered there were other groups wanting to reach the public with messages that were compatible with our sustainability format. There were also numerous public organizations that could provide important services. We realized that acting as an organizer would help us find hidden partnerships in the community that could help develop our project.

It was 2 years before the group located a good site for the garden on county property next to a popular county park. Finding an excellent site and developing a great teaching garden was the result of hard work and finding win-win situations for our community partners. Creating partnerships was simply a result of sharing our ideas with agencies and businesses, being patient, and finding out what we could do for others. The following is a list of OSU Extension partners that were not obvious when our project began and what each brought to our project.

- Douglas County Commissioners: Offered the site and a long-term land use agreement.
- County parks director: Garden paths, pavilion maintenance, soil, and rocks, shared toilet facilities.
- County waste reduction: Funds to build a composting demo area, recycling programs, and advertising budget for classes.
- Oregon Dept. of Environmental Quality: Funds for our teaching pavilion and compost area.
- Local architect: Design and drawings for our teaching pavilion.
- Wolf Creek Job Corp: Pavilion roof and garden benches.
- Local nurseries: Plant material for many of our theme gardens.
- Retired local craftsmen: Stone, wood, and iron work.
- North Willamette Research and Extension Center: Plant material for our gardens and our plant sales
- OSU Extension and the Oregon Master Gardeners made our partnerships work by providing the following services to our partners. We:
 - Provided a community project to the Douglas County Commissioners that fit the property bequest and added value to the site;
 - Built a beautiful addition to River Forks Park and gave the parks director an agreement to use our teaching pavilion when not occupied;
 - Gave county waste reduction and Oregon DEQ Extension trained people and a great demonstration area to teach composting, recycling and, sustainable gardening;
 - Gave Wolf Creek Job Corps high-visibility, interesting projects for their students and community recognition for the training center; and
 - Gave local businesses and craftsmen recognition for their skills and generosity in the community through the use of a donor board

Conclusion

Extension agents are accustomed to networking and forming partnerships in our communities to accomplish projects and run programs. However, it was an important self-realization that successful fund raising could be accomplished for a community project like our teaching garden, not by asking for donations as such, but by discovering partners who would find the project useful to meet their needs or goals. These partnerships often create long-term giving to a project, while cash donations are usually one-time gifts. With our partners' involvement we were able to build a 2-acre demonstration and teaching garden with a pavilion and other structures for one-third of our original estimate. These organizations found it much easier to provide valuable services to our project than capital. Don't overlook this potential resource for your next community project.

References

Peters, S. J. (2002). Rousing the people on the land: The roots of the educational organizing tradition in Extension work. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 40(3). Available at:

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