

# *in defense of revitalizing our* GARDEN CLUBS



Throughout the country, a new renaissance in gardening has taken root, and it should be nurtured. Traditionally, our nation's garden clubs and plant societies were uniquely positioned to embrace such growth; but are they now willing to make the changes necessary to have those gardeners embrace them? Marianne Willburn makes a case for re-examining the traditional model of Dues, Dos, and Don'ts—pointing the nation's clubs toward a sustainable future.



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**H**UMAN BEINGS instinctively gather. For millennia, humanity has congregated to jointly solve basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and protection, and we are stronger—and smarter—for it.

Our tendencies as a social species are no different once the proverbial dishes are washed and put away and the day's tasks are completed. We are drawn to those that share our interests and skills, knowing that there is much to be gained in the push and pull of discussion, and the joy of shared experience.

For gardeners, there is an added element of virtue in our pursuits, for our efforts and study not only manifest great personal satisfaction, but add to the health



of the planet as a whole. We may also feed the family or community that we love, or tangibly contribute to a civilization's worth of stored knowledge.

Yep, it's good to be a gardener. But when the newest and youngest in the tribe look for community, are the vast majority of our well-established clubs, associations and societies still relevant in their eyes? Though it might sting a little to recognize the gorilla in the room, the fact is, he's a silverback.

Our clubs are aging. And if we continue to ignore the issue by serving a comfortable, 20th-century club model to a 21st-century audience, horticultural organizations nationwide will soon be facing a very different kind of existential sustainability—their own.

Common sense tells us it's time to do something different. Who are we trying

to reach? How can we meet their needs?

## ANALOG VS. DIGITAL

Our newest generations are digitally savvy, raised and trained with software and smart phones and with very little experiential understanding of life, research, or the pursuit of happiness before the advent of Google. It is not a demographic naturally skeptical of Device Advice, having grown up immersed in it; and it exists comfortably, if frenetically, in digital systems that underpin daily activities as trivial as paying for a coffee.

Single-income households with community-active, stay-at-home spouses are no longer a societal norm, nor are reasonable work commutes. Although they

are focused on a greener world, young or beginning gardeners who might wish to beautify their communities or expand their horticultural horizons through participation in social organizations are nonetheless faced with a demanding reality juggling kids, career, home, garden, and budget.

Such a demographic has little desire to sit in a drafty church hall watching slide presentations on the indigenous flora of Kazakhstan in the evening after a long day at work—and no time during the day to discuss container combinations in tastefully appointed living rooms.

Faced with the choice of watching a Youtube video on soil preparation in their pajamas when they've got a spare second; or finding a babysitter in order to bring the average age in the room down by two

decades, they're more than likely to find their tribe in the relative anonymity, accessibility, and global reach of social media. They need an outlet, not an obligation.

## WHAT'S WORKING, WHAT'S NOT

If my assessment has left you with hackles raised, I understand. This is not a change I necessarily welcome, but one I feel we must honestly assess. The fact remains, too many of our folding chairs are going empty, and business-as-usual will result in the slow and painful death of worthy organizations it took many decades to build.

And while such losses may be considered a tragedy in the historical context, it is far more tragic that new generations will find less opportunity to benefit from the experience of those who might mentor them in a club setting—answering questions and providing regional wisdom and resources in a way that leaves apps and influencers in the dust.

The good news is, the events of the last two years may have provided a second chance to reach them.

## GARDENING GOES MAINSTREAM—AND DIGITAL

During the tumultuous years of 2020 and 2021, an astonishing number of people from all economic levels found themselves with time to contemplate the world outside their four walls—and felt an instinctual need to get in touch with it.

Whether it was a little balcony, a community garden plot, or a suburban lot once relegated to a mow-and-blow crew, it represented a chance to unplug from uncertainties and connect to natural rhythms that, for millennia, have quietly persisted beyond war, famine, pestilence, and plague. It took a pandemic and heroic efforts on the part of our nurserymen and -women to keep up with demand, but gardening was finally cool again—particularly among younger people.

At the same time, nationwide lockdowns restricted events such as garden shows, county fairs, community classes, and plant and seed swaps—discouraging face-to-face encounters that might have introduced those newly engaged gardeners to clubs and societies.

Though this might have constituted a death blow to horticultural organizations already struggling to survive, the concurrent mainstreaming of virtual platforms

pushed many organizations and their members to slowly gain confidence with digital technologies. The transition was fraught with painful mishaps, and not a little hilarity, but the need to gather—particularly for older members otherwise cut off from family and friends—was great.

Thus we emerge from this difficult period with new tools in our belt, and an excited, engaged public, hungry for gardening mentors. We are ready to gather again, to swap plants and see faces, and share a private laugh in a corner with another plant obsessive—and we're more than willing to share that experience with these new gardeners. But beyond the incorporation of Zoom, will our organizations instinctively retreat back into familiar models that don't meet modern gardeners where they find themselves?

It's time to adapt. Much like the flora we adore.

### **WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS AS AN ORGANIZATION? WHAT IS YOUR "PRODUCT?"**

Like it or not, young gardeners are not joining clubs and societies just for something fun to do. They are swapping time—which they view as a commodity, for

a product—which can be anything from expert knowledge to rare plants. It's important to identify what your group offers—and be proud of it. Is it:

- A deeper dive into a specific, popular, genus?
- Connection to a community of knowledgeable plantsmen and women?
- An opportunity to breed or show plants?
- A chance to see otherwise inaccessible private gardens?
- An opportunity to access and swap plants and seeds?
- The ability to see good speakers on a variety of topics?
- Group discounts or buying opportunities?
- Professional opportunities in horticulture through networking?

Answering this question defines your purpose moving forward. If you don't know what you offer, how will new members know why they should join? Coffee, cookies, and status on a Saturday afternoon just isn't going to cut it anymore.

### **ARE YOUR COMMUNITY OBLIGATIONS ONEROUS?**

I believe this to be one of the biggest

issues affecting dwindling membership in traditional clubs, or in the successful birthing of new ones. It's a harsh statement to make, for the desire to improve and beautify our communities is admirable and worthy and has traditionally been spearheaded by our garden clubs.

But what do such virtuous efforts matter if they chase away a newer generation that suffers under different time constraints than those of previous generations? New members might be willing to get babysitters for the occasional tour, or make a plant swap a family outing, but inducing that family to spend a hot summer's day digging out a bed at a local park when they have precious little time to attend to their own family garden, might be a bridge too far.

I have personally experienced this issue on two separate occasions, when the club I thought I was joining and/or co-creating to meet other gardeners was immediately co-opted by others intent on community service through guilt-laced coercion. In the end, one disappeared entirely and the other became a Facebook group.

What do you ask of your members? If applicable, what does a parent organization ask of you? Can a modern case be



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made to modify those obligations in the pursuit of attracting new members?

This approach does not imply we ask nothing of our members. Without cooperation and an investment of time, a club will quickly run out of people willing to give while others systematically take. However, if volunteer work is in *direct support* of the club's purpose to provide something worthwhile to members, people are more willing to step up. For instance, spending precious time potting up plants for a club sale is a lot more bearable when you know it will pay for the speakers you're longing to see.

### ARE YOUR DUES EXCESSIVE?

Dues not only provide some small measure of revenue to a group, they instill a sense of investment and importance, especially when there are millions of free social media groups and chat rooms available. But they can't be excessive.

Some parent organizations inflate those dues by requiring a large percentage of them, a practice that again reflects a different era and a different model. Might it not be better to restructure clubs so that members have a choice to join the parent group separately, in addition to their local chapter?

For instance, I am a member of the North American Rock Gardening Society and a member in its local chapter, Potomac Valley. Both offer fantastic benefits, but the larger parent group still sends out a gorgeous, printed quarterly journal filled with informative articles, and conducts Virtual Study Days with incredible speak-

ers. For me, it makes sense to join both, and I'm not even a rock gardener.

### HOW ACCESSIBLE ARE YOU?

In a very practical sense, this means making sure that members have options. If all your meetings take place during the day, a great proportion of your working members cannot attend. If all your meetings are in-person, you may cut down on participation by an equally large segment.

Conversely, if your meetings are strictly virtual, you run a great risk of slowly alienating members who are tired of staring at screens. New members are crucial to long-term sustainability, but in chasing them we cannot afford to dismiss the very real needs of members who may be uncomfortable with a fully digitized model.

Not everyone has a good internet connection and is digitally savvy. Not everyone has the desire or ability to buy and support a smart phone. Options for both worlds are necessary.

### HOW VISIBLE ARE YOU?

Plant sales, great speakers and garden tours don't just present an opportunity for members—they are a terrific recruiting opportunity for new members, and can be made affordable for the club by offering a non-member fee for admittance, and discounting it for students or young people. This allows potential members to mingle and decide if the club is right for them.

Partnering with other community garden clubs to host speakers or sales or booths

at community events can also make you more visible to more people. Invest in a sharp-looking bookmark or postcard ready to hand out with a quick club description and contact info for those who request it.

### DOES THE LETTER OF THE LAW STOP YOU HAVING FUN?

Recently, the debate over the slow demise of garden clubs became the subject of several articles on the long-running opinion blog, GardenRant, where I am a contributing editor. In one, fellow editor Scott Beuerlein offered an outrageous option in the fight to save them: fun over formality.

His Ohio-based garden club just celebrated its 10th year of informal, yet regular monthly gatherings. It's gotten so big, it has had to limit membership so participants can still visit gardens and descend on restaurants afterwards.

And that's the secret to its success, says Beuerlein. "I'm not suggesting that every group adopt such an unstructured template," he writes. "I think you can have a really great club or society that requires at least some rules of order, but if you're going to pry young and/or young-at-heart people out of their busy lives to spend time at a meeting, you had better also give them a bona fide 'night out'. And what constitutes that? A good start would be a chance to visit a beautiful place, to see amazing stuff, eat some unhealthy food, drink some beer, and to enjoy good times with great friends."

If you're already a part of a garden club or society, you probably don't need to be convinced that the opportunities provided by that club are priceless; but the ability to unplug and hang out with people who understand your passion is perhaps an even greater gift. Whether that includes a beer, wine, or some fizzy water really depends on your group—the point is the *joy*.

Our garden clubs may be aging, but the need for them is not. Indeed, I would suggest that the necessity of gathering with people who connect upon a shared interest—regardless of other affiliations—has never been greater.

We're stronger and smarter together, and that's worth fighting for. Let's reinvent this wooden wheel and get it rolling again. 🍷

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