



# Garden clubs: Cultivating buzz

Growers benefit by building relationships with gardening groups, both in person and online

BY CURT KIPP

**G**ARDEN CLUBS HAVE always had a mutually beneficial relationship with wholesale and retail nurseries. Each can provide something the other needs.

Nurseries need passionate gardeners who are always in search of new and interesting plant discoveries. Gardeners hunger for knowledge about new plant selections, places to shop, design ideas, solutions to common garden problems and much more.

That's why many growers and retailers cultivate relationships with clubs. Among them is Mark Leichty, director of business development with **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery**, a wholesale grower based in Aurora, Oregon. He's also the former owner of a wholesale/retail nursery.

Leichty accepts speaking engagements, and also hosts an occasional tour at Little Prince. "I probably do a lot more speaking than I've ever done," he said. "The topics vary. Sometimes I have done presentations on ferns, I've done gardening in shade, drought tolerant gardening, gardening with succulents, and sometimes it's just an introduction to all our brands and lines."

Leichty also manages the social media accounts for Little Prince and participates in gardening groups that exist on various online platforms. "I couldn't even tell you how many gardening

groups I belong to on Facebook," he said.

Leichty considers all the time spent on promotional work in person and online to be essential. "As an industry professional, I have a vested interest in working to create the current and future generation of gardeners," he said.

## Where the gardeners are

Garden and plant clubs are typically either based around a particular city or region, or devoted to a particular type of plant. There are clubs dedicated to fuchsias, begonias, ferns, daylilies, rhododendrons, conifers and many others. The Internet, likewise, has groups focused on gardening in general, as well as particular plant types or genera.

Dan Heims, a principal at **Terra Nova Nurseries Inc.**, remembers the pre-Internet days when garden and plant clubs were among the few forums where the non-academic could share knowledge.

Heims frequented such groups starting in the 1970s, which he considers the "golden age" of garden clubs. "You could bring a sick plant in and have resources," he said. "There was always some old person in the group. I've coined the term 'chlorophylluminati.' They just knew everything."



## Cultivating buzz

Previous page: Left: Mark Leichty speaks to attendees of the Farwest Show. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP Right: Plant enthusiasts listen to a presentation of the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

Top: Al's Garden & Home hosts a garden club event. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALS GARDEN & HOME Below: Social media posts from gardening groups reach a large online audience.



Garden clubs in the United States date back to the 1800s, and the Oregon Federation of Garden Clubs — still 83 clubs and 2,300 members strong today — started back in 1927. The impetus then was social as much as botanical. “Women wanted something to do while their husbands were away at work,” federation president Gaye Stewart said.

Although garden clubs have since changed (along with society and gender roles), Stewart believes in their continued importance.

“So many of our kids have no idea how you grow a vegetable, or where they come from,” she said. “We’re really conservationists. We want to protect and educate. I don’t know that there is a group in the state that buys more plants and appreciates the nurseries more than our members.”

With the Internet, however, garden clubs aren’t the only ready source of expertise and advice. It’s now possible to get a question answered in seconds by visiting Facebook or Reddit and finding the right group or board. “It’s almost instantaneous,” Heims said. “I love it.”

Heims reads gardening blogs on a daily basis and posts pictures, but still finds the experience lacking in some

respects. “There is nothing like coming to a meeting, experiencing the passion of the members firsthand, and putting your hands on the plants,” he said.

That’s why he still invests his time in clubs and groups, speaking to them frequently and hosting tours. “We open up our garden to the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon every year,” Heims said. “I open up my personal garden and we open up our garden at Terra Nova.”

Sometimes the in-person exposure leads to online exposure. “If you get one person enthused, it’s going to hit 100 more people,” Heims said. “For them to take a picture of a plant, put it up on the web, do a video, that’s all strokes.”

### Adapting to the times

There remains a broad concern over a decline in garden club membership and participation, whether due to aging leadership, the move to online forums or other factors.

In early 2018, one of the largest garden clubs in Oregon, the Metropolitan Garden Club of Portland, disbanded. Leaders cited declining interest in the club, though it had an active newsletter and regular events right up to its demise.

Judy Alleruzzo, the perennials and

house plants buyer for **Al’s Garden & Home** (Woodburn, Oregon) and co-host of the Garden Time TV show (Portland, Oregon), has noticed a similar dropoff. “The local daylily society and fuchsia society used to come to stores and do displays and ask questions,” she said. “They’ve stopped coming. They don’t have anybody to man the booth and interact.”

Their presence is missed. “It’s like having a focus group that you don’t have to organize,” Alleruzzo said. “You can ask, ‘What are you planting? What’s your focus?’ If they don’t talk to us, we don’t know.”

However, other garden clubs are growing and even thriving. One example is the Bonsai Society of Portland. “A huge portion of our club now is in the range of mid-20s to 50 now,” club president Lee Cheatle said. “It’s not just people in or nearing retirement, empty nesters. These people still have children but they want to do bonsai.”

Not so long ago, the club appeared headed for bankruptcy. “A bunch of us got together and said, ‘Not in my lifetime.’ And now we’re thriving,” Cheatle said.

One key survival strategy was to make all interested people feel welcome, regardless of skill level or knowledge. “I





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tell people at their first meeting that every-  
 one is sincerely there to help them learn  
 and to grow in their bonsai journey,”  
 Cheattle said.

Heims visited a recent International  
 Aroid Society Show in Florida and found  
 an environment of sharing and mentor-  
 ship. “They have some 80-year-olds in the  
 group and then there were some young,  
 25-year-olds in the group with their eyes  
 wide open,” Heims said.

He found the same at a recent sale of  
 the African Violet Society. “I went to it this  
 year and it was so crowded,” he said. “The  
 beauty of it was seeing all the young faces.”

## Changing of the guard

Last fall, the Hardy Plant Society of  
 Oregon (HPSO) attained an all-time high  
 of 2,700 members and 2,100 households,  
 according to administrator and past-  
 president Bruce Wakefield. The club has  
 promoted itself well and adapted offerings  
 to fit member desires.

“I think we’ve finally got some people  
 on our board who are under 50, and even  
 some under 40 who are very savvy with  
 social media,” Wakefield said. “They are  
 bloggers, in fact, and they know how to  
 reach out to younger generations and »

## Garden clubs and organizations

### NATIONAL

**Garden Club of America, The**  
18,000 club members, 200 clubs  
[www.gcamerica.org](http://www.gcamerica.org)

**National Garden Clubs Inc.**  
165,000 members, 5,000 clubs,  
70 national affiliate clubs, 330  
international affiliates clubs  
[www.gardenclub.org](http://www.gardenclub.org)

### OREGON

**Hardy Plant Society of Oregon**  
2500 members in Oregon  
[www.hardyplantsociety.org](http://www.hardyplantsociety.org)

**Oregon Master Gardeners**  
3587 members in Oregon  
[www.omga.org](http://www.omga.org)

**Oregon State Federation of  
Garden Clubs Inc.**  
2,350 members, 82 clubs  
[www.oregongardenclubs.org](http://www.oregongardenclubs.org)

**Native Plant Society of Oregon**  
14 chapters in Oregon  
[www.npsoregon.org](http://www.npsoregon.org)

### SPECIALTY GROUPS

**African Violets**  
**African Violet Society  
of America**  
[www.avsa.org](http://www.avsa.org)

**Bonsai**  
**Bonsai Society of Portland**  
[www.portlandbonsai.org](http://www.portlandbonsai.org)  
(Other groups in Eugene,  
Willamette Valley)

**Dahlias**  
**Portland Dahlia Society**  
[www.portlanddahlia.com](http://www.portlanddahlia.com)  
(Other groups are in Eugene,  
Coos Bay, Gold Beach, Roseburg,)

**Fuchsias**  
**Oregon Fuchsia Society**  
[www.oregonfuchsiasociety.com](http://www.oregonfuchsiasociety.com)

**Orchids**  
**Oregon Orchid Society**  
[www.oregonorchidsociety.org](http://www.oregonorchidsociety.org)  
(Other groups include Cherry  
Orchid Society, Portland Orchid  
Society)

**Peonies**  
**American Peony Society**  
[www.americanpeonysociety.org](http://www.americanpeonysociety.org)  
Pacific Northwest Peony Society  
[www.pnwpeony.org](http://www.pnwpeony.org)

communicate with them.”

The open garden program has become one of HPSO's most popular offerings. Some 120 private gardens participated during the 2018 summer season. “On any weekend from April 1 to October 1, our members could visit private gardens on Saturdays and Sundays

and sometimes Monday evenings,” Wakefield said.

HPSO's travel program is also popular, with about 450 members participating.

For speakers, HPSO draws on experts mostly from specialty nurseries and small retailers, and usually not from larger growing operations. They

have included Leonard Fultz of **Dancing Oaks Nursery** (Monmouth, Oregon), Paul Bonine of Xera Plants (Portland, Oregon) and Maurice Horn of **Joy Creek Nursery** (Scappoose, Oregon), among others.

“There is a core of people that are really plant nerds,” Wakefield said. “They want to know about the latest, greatest

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### Rhododendrons

#### American Rhododendron Society

5 societies in Oregon (Eugene, Portland, Siuslaw, Tualatin Valley, Willamette Valley)  
[www.rhododendron.org](http://www.rhododendron.org)

### Roses

#### American Rose Society

22 rose societies  
[www.rose.org](http://www.rose.org)

#### Portland Rose Society

[www.portlandrosesociety.org](http://www.portlandrosesociety.org)

#### Rogue Valley Rose Society

[www.facebook.com/roguevalleyrosesociety](http://www.facebook.com/roguevalleyrosesociety)

#### Tualatin Valley Rose Society

[www.tv-rs.org](http://www.tv-rs.org)

plant. We've had programs just on one plant. With our Genus Genius program, we have an expert on a genus present."

However, even with strong membership rolls, getting participation is still a challenge.

"We used to fill rooms with 600 people for a lecture in the 1990s," Wakefield said. "Now we are lucky to get 300 at a lecture, and that's despite the fact that our membership has actually grown. And people register for these events at the last minute. They expect more instant gratification and they don't want to make up-front commitments."

Or perhaps, Heims suggested, people lead busier lives and don't have the time they once did.

### The payoff for nurseries

In the end, growers like Leichty find that investing time and resources in garden and plant clubs is still worthwhile. "Garden clubs are a great source of word of mouth and traffic," he said. "If one person discovers a cool nursery or garden center, they come back and tell their whole club."

From a retail perspective, Alleruzzo has found that online discussions can lead to sales. "One lady is on the *Phellodendron* (cork tree) Facebook page and is asking me to bring in things that I've never even heard of," she said. "That's so cool. It's generating business. They're contacting us and saying, can you get these plants?"

For another example, demand for the Chinese money plant (*Pilea peperomioides*), a houseplant with pancake-like leaves, suddenly spiked. "We can't



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A group of gardeners attend an interactive program hosted by Al's Garden & Home.

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keep them in stock because there's a buzz somewhere on the Internet," Alleruzzo said. "And it's across the country. It's not just the Northwest."

The 4-inch houseplant is profitable, selling for \$20–\$30.

Leichty frequently writes blog and newsletter posts highlighting a particular plant. He does this to promote the plants as well as to assess gardeners' interest in particular ones.

"If I can generate a lot of interest in a particular plant that we don't grow, then it becomes worthwhile to invest in getting the stock to begin growing that particular plant," he said.

According to Wakefield, garden clubs are often eager to build relationships with more nurseries, and he hopes those nurseries will see the benefits.

"I wish that organizations like Hardy Plant could coordinate more with nurseries, not duplicate efforts," he said. "We need to network a little better and leverage each other's strengths." ©