

COVID-19 lessons from plant societies



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IN THIS UNPRECEDENTED period of a COVID-19 pandemic, several forest fires with lingering air pollution, and a very dry summer that has stressed all our plants, garden centers have also had to make many adjustments to retain their current customer base. On top of that, they also need to attract new customers.

Some garden centers have been more successful at this than others. Unfortunately, plant societies have also had to contend with many of these same issues.

Many societies were struggling with declining membership prior to COVID-19 and now there are even more difficulties facing them in order to remain viable. Perhaps some of the innovations that plant societies have made can be of use — with some adaptation — to garden centers.

Hardy Plant Society of Oregon

When I asked Jim Rondone why he joined the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon (HPSO), he said, “I came for the plants and stayed because of the gardeners.” He now serves as its president. With a membership of 2,500 plus, HPSO is one of the larger plant societies in the Pacific Northwest and perhaps the United States.

According to Jim, many members are passionate about gardening and want to meet other like-minded people. This was easy to do in the pre-pandemic days, but now with no actual meetings, it is rather difficult to gather members.

The HPSO board of directors is going through a daunting challenge. How do they conduct activities that would allow them to retain their current membership and also attract new members?

There are four primary reasons why people join HPSO: to meet with other gardeners, attend the speaker series, go to plant sales, and take part in the Open Garden Program. Unfortunately, all of

these had to be canceled or modified.

Hortlandia, the HPSO spring plant sale and one of the largest plant sales in the region, was canceled. Canceling the event was a tough decision to make because it is not only their largest fundraiser but also because many small growers rely on it as a major component of their income. This was a significant loss, especially for those growers who do not have a retail outlook.

The HPSO Open Garden Program is immensely popular. Members receive a booklet listing the private gardens around the area members can visit, and the dates and times they will be open. This year, however, program had to be severely altered after the booklet was sent. Visits were by appointment only, and the number of visitors at any one time was capped to comply with social distancing. The mandatory isolation imposed by COVID actually made various HPSO social media programs busier and more active, because they provided a way for members to be engaged.

Some years ago, HPSO Study Groups were created so that members could have smaller meetings within the geographic area in which they lived. This option proved to be quite popular, and today some of these Study Groups are having Zoom meetings. Whether there will be a plant sale next spring or in-person meetings remains to be seen.

American Rhododendron Society

The Portland Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society is facing similar challenges. Even with a smaller membership of passionate gardeners, (100+ members), the task of adapting to meet the challenging conditions of today is no less easy. I talked with Steve McCormick and John Stephens, membership chairs of the local chapter, to under-

stand the changes they are making.

Steve told me that the importance of publishing a healthy and content-heavy newsletter cannot be stressed enough. It provides a source for local and international information and has many color photographs to keep readers engaged. It is only available electronically. However, there are also quarterly journals published which expand the informational base.

The Portland Chapter’s social and top fund-raising event is the Mother’s Day Plant Sale at Crystal Springs Rhododendron Garden. This year, the in-person event was canceled. However, changes were made to bring it online to accommodate members and the public and it seemed to work. The plant sale was held virtually, with pictures of each plant and the price. People could pay online and pick up their plants at Crystal Springs.

In the end, every plant was sold. One of the reasons for this is that the sale at Crystal Springs used to last three days, but this online sale ran until June. Members were happy because they could buy the plants they wanted and the growers were happy because they did not have to take any back. What could have been a negative turned into a positive, and the chapter continues to adapt.

Portland Rose Society

The Portland Rose Society was established in 1889 and these days, it has about 650 members. The society meets at Oaks Park and the last meeting this year was held in February.



WHAT I'M HEARING

The Portland Rose Society Spring Rose Show displays thousands of roses.

PHOTO BY RICH BAER



The Rose Society's major event each year is the Annual Rose Show, held in June to coincide with the Portland Rose Festival. This rose show draws entries of more than 3,000 roses from members and other rose growing gardeners. There is also a Fall Rose Show and a Mini Rose Show, which features miniature roses. All of these were canceled this year. There are two major fundraisers: the sale of their own specialty fertilizer and their rose calendars — which are very popular.

I talked with Rich and Dr. Charold Baer, who have both been president of the Portland Rose Society and are avid rose growers, with over 1,000 roses in their garden. I wanted to know what changes they have made, or will make, in our current environment to maintain the membership they have.

The Rose Society will have virtual

meetings beginning in the fall. They have a comprehensive website and are active on social media. One of the reasons for becoming a member is their excellent newsletter, *Rose Chatter*, which is written and edited by Rich and Charold, and published eight times a year. It is available in electronic or paper format. The electronic format is ideal because there are many photos of roses and they are all in color, as compared to the black and white print version.

The society does outreach into the community with their many pruning demonstrations that are held each spring at local garden centers. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, that will probably not happen and the society is producing a film "How to Prune Roses." There have been many

changes since 1889!

There is no crystal ball

We do not have a crystal ball to predict what 2021 will bring. Hopefully, there will be a vaccine and no forest fires. Whatever it is, we need to try to be prepared and to be open to new ideas.

Garden centers have instituted some innovations this year that are very impressive and they should be commended for them. It has not been an easy time and whether things ever return to normal remains to be seen. However, one thing that we are certain of is that the human ability to overcome difficulties through continuous innovation. We are limitless, and gardeners exemplify that strong characteristic. ☺

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