



# Trade shows in the time of COVID

The Baltimore and Minnesota shows plan virtual offerings for January

BY JON BELL

**S**INCE 1981, THE Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show has been held every year at the Baltimore Convention Center. One of the industry's largest shows, it usually draws close to 12,000 attendees and nearly 1,000 exhibitors to about 300,000 square feet of convention center space.

MANTS would have commenced as normal in January 2021, except for one sizeable bump in the road: The Baltimore Convention Center has been converted into a field hospital to take care of people suffering from COVID-19.

As a result, MANTS executives made the difficult but understandable decision in July to bail on an in-person trade show in January.

"I think we absolutely made the right call," said Vanessa Finney, executive director of the Maryland Nursery and Landscape Association and executive vice president for MANTS.

But just because the pandemic nixed in-person trade shows didn't mean the show wouldn't go on for MANTS. Instead, organizers rallied. They researched virtual options and consulted with other shows like Cultivate that had gone virtual.

The result is the MANTS.com Business Hub, a virtual platform that's giving buyers and exhibitors a chance to do business even as COVID-19 is keeping most folks at home.

"In the time of the pandemic, this is still a way for people to make connections and show that well-meaning and well-thought-out commerce can still happen," Finney said.

She described the hub as less a virtual trade show booth and more a profile where exhibitors can share videos, images, written materials, links and other content with attendees. Attendees can pick

which areas most interest them and, through a software algorithm similar to those used in matchmaking apps, be linked to specific exhibitors. As of early December, more than 530 exhibitors had registered. Attendees can also connect in real time with vendors through Zoom, Webex

and Go To Meetings.

"Whatever they're looking for — products, services, anything they need — they're still going to be able to find it through our wonderful exhibitors," Finney said.

Though the MANTS.com Business Hub is focused around January 6–8, the hub has been open since December 1 and will remain open 90 days after January 8; however, registration ends January 8.

## Northern Green also goes online

Like MANTS, the annual Northern Green show, presented by the Minnesota Nursery & Landscape Association and the Minnesota Turf and Grounds Foundation, decided it would have to go virtual back in October for its January show. Cassie Larson, MNLA's executive director, said the Northern Green Virtual event, which runs January 11–14, will give exhibitors and attendees an opportunity to interact face-to-face in a virtual trade show environment, albeit through Zoom and video chats. They'll be able to create profiles to share information, join discussions and schedule meetings.

Beyond the commerce component, Northern Green Virtual will also have a robust educational offering. There will be 45-minute live-streamed sessions, some pre-recorded sessions and a few 20-minute mini sessions. Morning Coffee Chats will also help people communicate in a more relaxed format.

"It'll be more like a Zoom meeting where folks of similar interest can come together," Larson said. "One morning it might be growers, another it might be landscape designers. And we'll have someone moderating."

She said the show will also feature check-in chats with legislators for updates on important industry issues. Each day will close with a different session, including a virtual game hour, a Green Industry Virtual Awards Celebration and a "Solving the Labor Crisis" workshop followed by a Zoom happy hour.

"There will be a little something for everyone," Larson said.

Oregon will offer its own virtual marketplace in February with NurseryGuide LIVE. Additional details will be in the February issue of *Digger*. ©

*Jon Bell is a freelance journalist based in Oregon who writes about everything from craft beer and real estate to the great outdoors. He can be reached at jontbell@comcast.net.*

### More info

#### MANTS.com Online Hub

January 6-8 (Hub remains open for 90 days after)

[www.mants.com](http://www.mants.com)

#### Northern Green Virtual

January 11-14

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

#### Nursery Guide LIVE

February 17-18

[www.NurseryGuideLive.com](http://www.NurseryGuideLive.com)