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Cultivating buzz

Garden clubs and the nursery industry

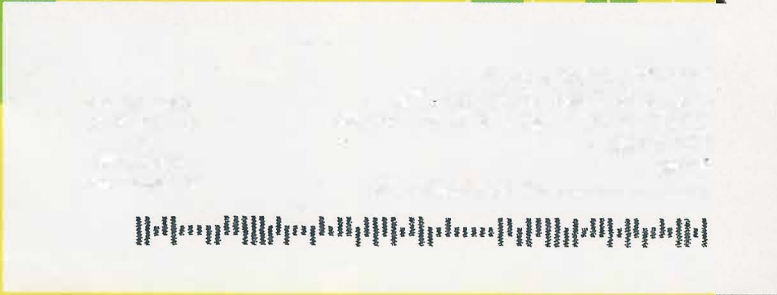
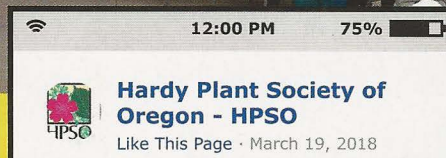
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Garden clubs: Cultivating buzz

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

BY CURT KIPP

GARDEN 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.

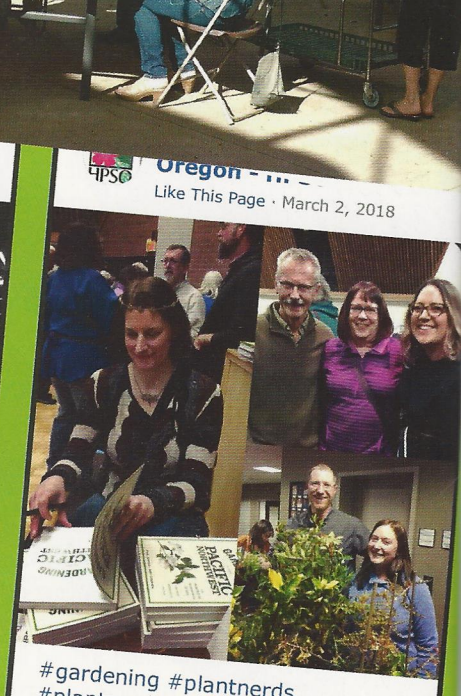
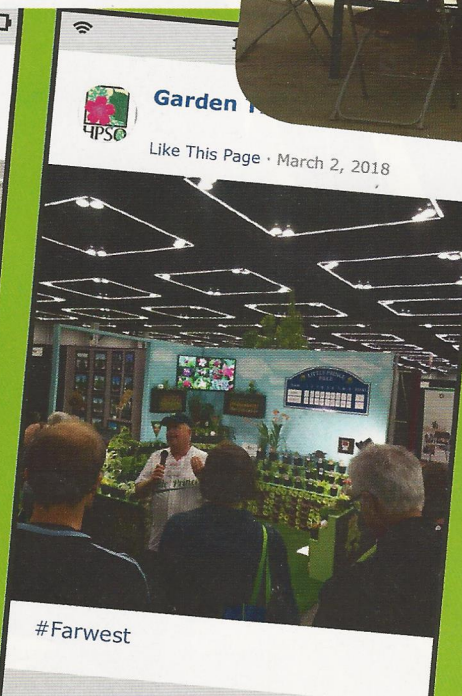
Dan Heims, a principal at **Terra Nova Nurseries Inc.**, remembers the pre-Internet days when garden and plant clubs were among the few forums where the non-academic could share knowledge.

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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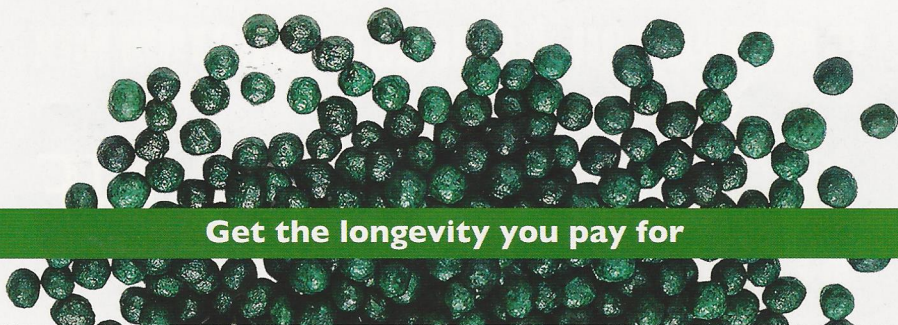
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tell people at their first meeting that everyone is sincerely there to help them learn and to grow in their bonsai journey," Cheatle said.

Heims visited a recent International Aroid Society Show in Florida and found an environment of sharing and mentorship. "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 >>>