

North Carolina Chefs Who Cultivate Restaurant Gardens: A Population with a Hunger for Extension Information

Abstract

As part of a larger study designed to explore the gardening practices and educational needs of North Carolina chefs who cultivate restaurant gardens, the chefs' desired areas of knowledge and preferences for delivery of educational material were identified. As a result, a plan for North Carolina Cooperative Extension to use in developing educational programs for this population was completed. This article provides information on this emerging population and focuses on specific techniques Extension might use in developing educational programs that engage this audience.

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An Emerging Audience

More Americans are keeping food gardens at home (Sinnes, 2014), and more chefs are beginning to cultivate restaurant gardens (Cook, 2009). These trends indicate that there is a growing population in search of educational information on gardening practices. Because Cooperative Extension provides communities with educational programs, having a better understanding of North Carolina chefs' needs and interests allows North Carolina Cooperative Extension to develop programs, publications, and presentations that specifically address those needs and interests.

What the Audience Wants to Know and How Extension Can Deliver It

Through a larger study that explored gardening practices and educational needs of North Carolina chefs who cultivate restaurant gardens, the desired areas of knowledge and preferences for delivery of educational material for this audience were identified. The chefs want to know about container growing, crop rotation, drought-resistant varieties, greenhouses, growing seasons, hydroponic systems, irrigation options for various growing areas, local farming, soil testing, sustainability, and unique varieties of produce (Sommerfeld, 2014) Findings

about preferences for delivery of educational material indicated that the chef gardeners tend toward being self-paced learners (Sommerfeld, 2014). Self-paced learning occurs when a learner can go through course content at his or her own speed, without that speed being influenced by other learners (Beyer, 1977). This method provides a great deal of flexibility to learners and allows for individual access of learning materials (Anderson, Annand, & Wark, 2005). The chefs want relevant information to be delivered through books, pamphlets, and other printed publications; websites and blogs; and YouTube videos (Sommerfeld, 2014).

Clearly Extension has an opportunity to become a main source of information on growing practices for these chefs. Understanding the chefs' desired areas of knowledge about gardening practices and their learning preferences is critical to meeting the chefs' needs. With this information in hand, Extension professionals can tap into the tools that will be most effective in creating and delivering the necessary programming.

Techniques for Using Applicable Resource Tools to Supply Needed Information

Chef gardeners need knowledge about gardening-related topics, and Extension should provide various educational materials that allow for self-paced learning. Here, we suggest techniques Extension might use in developing programs that engage this audience.

Websites and Blogs

Because the Internet is a primary resource for these chefs, Extension must consider it an important medium for reaching them. Extension could implement various websites to deliver an array of information via how-to articles. For example, Extension could provide a series of online articles informing chefs about how to up-cycle objects from around the restaurant for use in container growing during different growing seasons. These websites also could include frequently-asked-questions sections, "Ask a Farmer" functionality, and lists of links to other resources that would be helpful in meeting chef gardeners' educational needs. Such resources could, for example, help chefs get answers to questions about specific growing areas in particular regions.

Another tool Extension can use to reach these chefs is blogs. Blogs allow readers to find information provided by a main author, share information about their practices, leave feedback, and have conversations with others seeking information. Blogging opens up lines of communication between main authors and audiences and provides a self-paced method of learning whereby individuals can obtain the information they need and decide how it can be applied to their particular gardens and restaurants. It also allows for knowledge sharing by users, offering them a chance to "pay forward" their knowledge to others.

YouTube Channels

In developing YouTube channels that target this audience, Extension has the opportunity to deliver information in a visual, multimedia format to chefs seeking specific details on gardening practices. YouTube as an educational tool for Extension makes sense because of its accessibility and ease of use (Kinsey, 2010). With YouTube channels, audience members can subscribe, browse through the resources, and receive notifications when a new video is posted. One way Extension can use YouTube to reach chefs is by making multiple-video series on specific topics. For instance, Extension could focus on irrigation systems for different growing areas and incrementally release multiple videos on the topic, with video subject matter potentially including irrigation systems for raised beds, rooftop containers, and large plots of land to address the varied needs of this particular population.

Because chef gardeners need a large amount of information, Extension could develop multiple-video series on a variety of topics geared toward this audience. This visual educational strategy allows chefs to observe the material while in their homes and restaurants, providing them with the information they need when they need it.

Books and Other Printed Materials

Even with today's technology and electronic resources, we found that there is still a need for educational material in the form of books and other printed materials. In using printed materials to deliver educational programming, Extension could deliver periodical brochures, magazines, and pamphlets on an array of topics right to a chef's home or restaurant. By mailing the materials directly to establishments, Extension reduces the number of steps audience members must take to seek out needed information. A great way to use printed sources is to focus on an upcoming growing season, reoccurring pests, or weather trends in a particular region. These resources could also provide chefs with tips on what to plant, how to plant, when and how to harvest, and so on for a particular region or particular space constraints. An added incentive for creating printed resources is that doing so allows members of the targeted audience to establish their own collections of resources that they can use multiple times as needs arise.

Conclusion

By using the techniques described here to provide chef gardeners with educational resources, Extension can provide materials that allow chefs the flexibility and freedom to find needed information in a variety of ways. Extension's mission of increasing knowledge and promoting behavior change (Gharis, Hubbard, Bardon, Taylor, & Evans, 2014) is met via these social media and mass mailing techniques yet still involves agents' reaching out to the targeted audience and providing guidance. Applying these techniques allows the audience to collect the same information that may have been provided through face-to-face Extension seminars, but the chefs are able to gain the information at their own rates and on their own schedules, resulting in an added incentive to take advantage of all that Extension can offer.

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