Designing Consumer Horticulture Mass Media Programs for Efficiency

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Summary. An effort has been made to minimize the time involved in production of consumer horticulture radio tele-
vision, and newspaper columns on a state level, while maximizing quality and utilization. The production of The Virginia
Gardener weekly radio program is an annual 4-day marathon
recording interviews with subject matter experts. The weekly
Virginia Gardener vegetable gardening video series, originally
produced for commercial television stations, has been re-issued
for cable stations and re-edited for Master Gardener training.
The weekly Virginia Gardener newspaper column is written from a computer data bank of press releases prepared in
previous years for use by agents in local extension programs.

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tatewide mass media efforts in radio and television
programming provide high visibility for consumer
horticulture extension programs; statewide distribution of a weekly newspaper column has been a traditional
approach to information distribution by extension media services. Pound (1985) reports that, while people do not
seek information of the type provided by the Cooperative
Extension Service in newspapers, radio, or television these
represent three of the top five places where this information
was found by the public in the month preceding the study.
Thus, this information reaches an audience that is not
seeking the information actively, but is aware that it has been
made available, and does pick up considerable information
on the topics presented.

Three widely used mass media programs from the
Office of Consumer Horticulture at Virginia Tech have been a weekly radio program on 58 stations a television
series used on commercial and cable stations and a column
distributed to 110 newspapers. These programs provide high visibility, such as a weekly audience for radio of
>1.6 million estimated by a survey of the stations using the
program. Their educational impact is difficult to determine.
however, it is believed to be relatively low in terms of actual
behavior change, based on responses to offers of material
or information via radio and press releases. These materials are
intended to supplement the efforts of the local extension
agents and they provide mass media information to those
audiences not currently served by local agents. Methods
have been developed to minimize the state extension spe-
cialist and staff time needed to produce these materials and
to re-issue materials after minimum modification for use
with new audiences.

Radio

Through an evolutionary process that started with
weekly trips to the Virginia Tech campus radio studios to
read a prepared script, the Virginia Gardener radio program
has developed into an interview format between the consumer
horticulture specialist and appropriate experts from the
College of Agriculture at Virginia Tech. Recordings are
made of interviews with 12 to 14 experts during a 4-day
period in late fall. Each expert is interviewed for five or six
3-min seasonally appropriate programs, and subject matter
is selected throughout the year. Prior to the interviews a
calendar is developed based on the subjects each guest plans
to discuss, and adjustments in topics are made to ensure that
five programs are prepared for each month. Programs are
timely to the season, but not to the week, as Virginia crosses
three climatic zones, with growing seasons ranging from
190 to 290 days. Neither weather conditions nor pest
problems are uniform throughout the state due to geographic
variations from mountains to beaches.

Each session with an expert requires ≈ 1 h, for a total of
12 to 14 h of studio tune. In addition to recording time = 4
four h are required from the consumer horticulture specialist
to make a list of topics, solicit interviews, and prepare a calendar of programs. The radio producer edits the interviews and
produces a finished program on a monthly basis. Her prepa-
rations time and the extension specialists’ time are reduced
annually by a total of 80 h from previous methods of recording,
which involved writing script outlines and familiarizing the information officer with the subject matter.

There are several additional benefits to this method:
having a year’s worth of topics completed gives control over
production tune in case other major projects arise; portions of
the recorded interviews are available for use in other types of
radio programming during the year; it assists radio stations in
program scheduling, as they receive a full month’s program on
one tape; and it reduces shipping and handling costs through
production and distribution of tapes on a monthly basis.

This is the most widely distributed radio program from
the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service, being used on 58
stations and covering 80% of the geographic regions of the
state. Twelve agents incorporate it into their programs and 46
stations use it as a feature. Respondents to a survey of radio
stations reported the programs are used an average of twice
each week, with an estimated total weekly audience of 1.6
million. It usually is broadcast between 12 noon and 1 pm, but
several stations use it in the early morning hours.

Television

The design, production, and distribution of a series of
36 short videotapes (averaging 3.5 mm) required 20 staff
hours per week of production time for 18 months, including
horticulture specialist and video production time.

The availability of the complete program was an-
nounced to the three network channels in each of the five
viewing areas in the state. Availability was on a first-contact exclusive-usage basis in each of the five viewing areas:
Stations in Richmond, Roanoke, and Virginia Beach used
the program the first year. One station used the program at
12 noon and 5 pm on Friday, while the other two used it in
the early morning time slots.

The following year, the program was made available
directly to cable television stations and to extension agents for use
in their cable programs. The program was used on 12 stations.

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Usage records were not kept the following year, but it is known that at least five of the original stations re-used the program and three other stations used it for the first time. The programs then were re-edited as a set of eight programs running 7 to 10 min each. Subject matter was grouped into related areas, openings and closing were deleted, and original tapes were edited into the new format. The revised set of programs was re-released through extension agents and cable networks. In addition, this revised set is used as training material for Master Gardeners in 35 localities.

The multiple use of these programs with relatively little editing increases the return on the initial time investment in terms of public exposure. Because the programs cover established cultural practices, the tapes will remain useful and will represent appropriate horticultural practices for many years.

Newspaper

Some agents contribute weekly garden columns to their local newspapers; however, many of the small local papers in the state do not have extension horticultural information available to them. While some of the 110 newspapers that receive the weekly Virginia Gardener column use it on a regular basis, most of them use it randomly as a filler. It often is converted to a feature article by the newspaper staff rather than being used as a column with a by-line. This use of material is consistent with other types of press releases sent out by the Media Services Dept. at Virginia Tech. While this periodic and unpredictable use does provide visibility to Virginia Tech extension as well as horticultural information for the reader, the amount of time it would require for a specialist to write a unique weekly column does not appear to be justified. Material for these newspaper mailings is prepared monthly by reviewing, editing, and updating information stored in the HORT network on the Virginia Tech mainframe computer. Press releases, prepared and distributed to agents for their exclusive use in local mass media efforts 4 years prior to the current date, are revitalized and re-issued to the newspapers. Total specialist time is \( \approx 2 \) h/month, with an additional hour of staff time to check the availability of specific plant varieties and similar information. Since all information exists in electronic form, minimal time is required for the Media Services staff to prepare it for distribution. Although no usage records are maintained by Media Services, we know from a clipping service that, during the first 6 months of availability, the column was used regularly by an estimated 13% of the newspapers, with others using it sporadically.

The production of mass media programs using methods that minimize staff time and use existing resources can provide horticultural information to a wide audience and maintain extension visibility among the residential population, while holding down costs. The increasing demands on personnel and the decreasing funds for extension activities make this type of efficient, high-impact production essential to the continuation of extension mass media programming.

Literature Cited