

NORTH MISSISSIPPI GARDEN EXPO

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ABSTRACT: Mississippi State University has an opportunity to reach a non-traditional agricultural audience, the home gardener. These new clients are the driving force behind the fastest growing segment of agriculture today: The Green Industry. They are involved in the entire range of gardening including ornamentals, vegetables, and turf. They are by far the largest client group that MSU agriculture could hope to reach. MSU-ES county agents report that the majority of the calls that they receive are related to garden and landscape questions. This event is an attempt to bring together the gardeners that have questions and interests with the MSU professionals that have comprehensive expertise in the many subjects that are related to gardening. Approximately 500 people attended the 2001 Expo.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS: The North Mississippi Research & Extension Center hosts the North Mississippi Garden Expo to help it's goal of providing horticulture programs and information for northeastern Mississippi residents. The Garden Expo was patterned after the highly successful Fall Garden Day held at the Crystal Springs Truck Crop Branch Experiment Station. The Crystal Springs Garden Day attracts large crowds and has been a much anticipated annual event for central Mississippi gardeners for more than twenty years. Unfortunately, Crystal Springs, below Jackson, is too far for most north Mississippi gardeners to travel for the event. The first Garden Expo event for gardeners in northern Mississippi was staged in Verona in 1997. The Expo has been undertaken in both the spring and in the fall to try to find the 'best' time to reach gardeners. It was determined in 2000 that the Garden Expo would be more effective for gardeners if the event were held in the autumn. In the fall, plants from the summer cultivar evaluations are still living in the beds, where in the spring, there would be little plant material in the field for gardeners to observe. There is generally an autumn flush of bloom in the Rose Garden which is a popular attraction for Expo attendees.

Field stops in 2001 included the Rose Garden and the Annual Garden within the Magnolia Botanical Gardens. Members from the Northeast Mississippi Rose Society shared their interest and expertise in roses with gardeners. The new bridge leading from the NMREC parking lot to the Rose Garden facilitated the movement of walkers to the gardens. MSU vegetable and irrigation specialists were stationed at the vegetable and herb beds to answer questions. Mississippi Medallion plant trials in the beds near the Exhibit Tent attracted flower gardeners.

The Exhibit Tent housed MSU experts and specialists. The 'Plant Doctor' from the Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology diagnosed insect and disease problems and dispensed strategies to prevent future problems. Plant material specialists from the Department of Plant & Soil Science identified mystery plants brought by gardeners. The state turf specialist answered questions concerning homeowner turf problems. One MSU horticulturist came from Biloxi to relate her experiences in deterring mammalian pests, especially deer, from gardens and landscapes. Pesticide usage and safety precautions were the topic for the representative from the Mississippi Department of Agriculture & Commerce Bureau of Plant Industry. The Butterfly Tent was an often visited attraction where people learned how to identify butterflies and how to plant their landscape to provide food and shelter for butterflies. The Mississippi Master Gardeners were represented with an information booth in the Exhibit Tent plus a large plant sale under a separate tent adjacent to the Exhibit Tent.

Norman Winter, horticulturist with the MSU Extension Service, and the headline speaker for the seminars in the NMREC auditorium shared his ideas for new, exciting plants for the fall and spring garden. Other MSU Extension Service horticulture specialists addressed topics ranging from the proper method to obtain a soil sample to home landscaping tips. The landscape specialist from Northeast Mississippi Community College reviewed proper pruning

techniques for landscape plants. Additional seminars addressed strawberry and tomato production, landscape irrigation, Mississippi Medallion plants, color in the garden, and urban tree care.

Surveys taken at the Expo indicate that 89% of respondents would purchase garden supplies as a result of information obtained at the Expo. The Expo had an economic impact for the Northeast Mississippi Green Industry. 95% of the people who filled out a survey said that they planned to attend the 2002 Expo.