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## Effectiveness of a Gardening Newsletter

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## Effectiveness of a Gardening Newsletter

### Abstract

Newsletters are a time-honored Extension method of disseminating research-based information to help clients live fuller, more productive lives. But are they as effective as we think they are? To find out, we surveyed home gardeners receiving a monthly garden newsletter from their county Extension office. The survey demonstrated that this newsletter, in its present format, (paper, and online in HTML and PDF) is meeting the needs of the target audience and has effectively fostered more sustainable gardening practices. The survey also demonstrated an interest among this audience in receiving electronic versions of newsletters in the future.

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## The Issue

Many Extension program staff use newsletters to disseminate research-based information that is intended to help clients live fuller, more productive lives. But how do we know whether these newsletters are effective?

The Piscataquis County office of University of Maine Cooperative Extension publishes the *Piscataquis Gardening Newsletter*, sending this monthly mailing to more than 400 home horticulture clientele. The goal of the newsletter is to provide localized timely information on practical, sustainable, research-based horticultural practices and suggest techniques to improve gardening success. Topics include growing and caring for vegetables, fruits, and flowers; pest management; and upcoming events.

After 3 years of publishing this newsletter, we needed to gauge the effectiveness of this program delivery method.

## What We Did

Using suggestions from a Penn State fact sheet on program evaluation of newsletters through a mail survey, we developed a survey that was included in the December 2005 issue with a business reply envelope. The questions were designed to assess audience participation, future program needs, reaction to resources, and behavior changes resulting from the newsletter. (Gettings, 2001) The responses would enable us to evaluate the newsletter on two levels: accountability and program/newsletter improvement.

Eighty-five completed surveys were returned, for a 20.6% return rate. A recent study that involved a survey of an Extension parenting newsletter series had a return rate of 17% (Weigel & Martin, 2004). Hence our return rate appears typical for an Extension newsletter survey.

## What We Found Out

Ninety-four percent of respondents indicated that they usually read all or part of the entire newsletter. Seventy percent wanted to keep the current monthly, four-page format. Table 1 shows clients' opinions of the content and format of the newsletter.

Table 1.

## Clients' Opinions of the Content and Format of the Newsletter

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Tend to Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>
a. Unbiased information	42%	40%	10%	8%
b. Timely information	57%	36%	7%	
c. Easy-to-understand writing	70%	26%	4%	
d. Easy-to-read print size	66%	33%	1%	

The *Piscataquis Gardening Newsletter* is available online in HTML and PDF formats at <http://www.umext.maine.edu/piscataquis/gardening/newsletter.htm>. Thirty-one percent of respondents indicated that they didn't even know the newsletter was available online, and 5% reported accessing the newsletter online. One respondent wrote, "Wish it were online—wow, it is!" With the recent postage increase and rising printing costs, mailing monthly newsletters may not remain viable. As more clients utilize the Internet to find information, UMaine Extension will be able to point them to electronic versions of the newsletter with full-color photos and live links to in-depth articles. Clients will be able to search prior issues for topics.

Table 2 shows how clients changed their behavior after receiving the newsletter.

**Table 2.**  
How Client Habits Changed

	<b>Increased</b>	<b>Stayed the Same</b>	<b>Decreased</b>	<b>Does Not Apply</b>
Knowledge of plant pests	88%	12%		
Choose resistant varieties	46%	43%	3%	8%
Looking for pests before spraying	43%	41%		16%
Use least-toxic pest-control methods	53%	39%	2%	6%
Knowledge of garden soils	72%	28%		
Take a soil sample before I add soil nutrients	38%	45%	3%	14%
Confidence in my own gardening know-how	66%	30%		4%
Yield of vegetables	36%	43%	4%	17%
Success with flower beds	50%	43%		7%

When asking readers what information they want in the future newsletters, they suggested 128 topics that included landscaping, flowers, fruits and vegetables, and pests. While it was affirming to learn that they wanted many topics already being covered, client suggestions for more specific information on organic pest control, easy and quick gardening methods, houseplant care, woodstove use, and ways to use surplus from their gardens will help us produce more targeted articles.

Clients also shared written comments.

- "It is an easy read, good format, and easy to put in a 3-ring binder for future reference."
- "Article on plants that are invasive. Stopped me from buying a couple."
- "Usually there is something helpful to me in the newsletter (i.e. in Dec. 05 soaking vines before trying to make into wreaths)."

## Conclusion

The results of this evaluation clearly show that respondents perceive the newsletter as a benefit, and have increased their knowledge of and confidence in gardening. Over 80% of those surveyed agreed that the information provided in the newsletter is unbiased.

This evaluation of our program delivery method demonstrated that it is making a difference in the

clients served. We learned that this newsletter in its present format is meeting the needs of the target audience--home gardeners--and has effectively fostered more sustainable gardening practices that are in line with following sustainable agriculture approaches advocated by ATTRA - National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service:

- Build soil structure and fertility using soil test results.
- Manage pests ecologically (Earles, 2005).

In Maine, only four out of 16 counties produce a gardening newsletter aimed at the general public. In the future, other county home horticulture staff can use the results of this survey to gauge the potential effectiveness of a gardening newsletter for their home gardening clientele. Those with cost issues can consider posting their gardening newsletter on the Internet. Those with time constraints can consider working with educators in other counties to jointly write a localized gardening newsletter.

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