

# A hardy group for hardy plants

What makes some plant societies and garden clubs grow in membership while others struggle to maintain their current members or, in many instances, see membership decline?

Sometimes the drop-off is so dramatic that despite the desire of some individuals to continue, the organization is simply no longer viable. I have known several organizations that disbanded due to decreased members and lack of participation.

Several weeks ago I was at the annual meeting of the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon and heard President Jim Rondone give an overview of the society's current status. The numbers are impressive, with 2,363 members — an all-time high.

I recently met with Jim to get his thoughts on the health of the organization and why it is thriving.

## Seeds of the society

Jim shared the history of how the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon (HPSO) was officially established in 1984. There had been an avid group of about three dozen gardeners in the Portland area who had been making an annual trek to Edmonds Community College near Seattle to hear international and national speakers on gardening. One year, the Edmonds meeting had to be cancelled. The Portland gardeners were so distressed that they decided to form their own group.

Sharon Streeter, one of the founders of the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon, was elected the first president. She remembers how thrilled she and the other founders were when the membership grew to 100. Sharon credits Lucy Hardiman, an early member, with “cranking it into high gear” and recruiting new members. Sharon also contributed by initiating the HPSO *Bulletin*, a newsletter created to help educate people about gardening.

Membership continued to grow, reaching nearly 1,800 in 2008. However in 2009, possibly due to the general economic downturn, membership declined to about 1,500. In recent years membership has rebounded to almost 2,400.

## What I'm Hearing

## Mike Darcy



Today the society is flourishing as it celebrates its 30th anniversary.

How has HPSO stayed viable and continued to attract new members and keep the existing ones? This is the question I wanted Jim Rondone to address, because I felt his intimate knowledge of HPSO could provide useful information for other garden groups.

Jim believes one reason is that the president can only serve a maximum of two two-year terms, thus insuring there will be a new president at least every

four years. New leaders bring new ideas to perpetuate the growth of the organization. In fact, each of the last three HPSO presidents has served for just a single two-year term.

In stark contrast, many small garden organizations are led by a president who never leaves office because no one else is willing to take the post.

## Growing community

The HPSO leaders learned early that there must be some activities, other than meetings, to attract members and keep them.

One of the most popular activities is their Open Garden Program. Members open their gardens to other members, affording them an opportunity to see and visit many gardens that they would not otherwise be able to access. Members who want to open their gardens select a date and time; this information is



The Open Garden Program organized by the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon is one of the most popular events with society members.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRY WAGNER

printed in the program booklet that is sent to all members each spring.

The program is continually being refined. One recent improvement asked members in a particular geographic area to open their gardens on the same date and time span, thus making it convenient for members to visit several gardens at one time. Another was deciding to open members' gardens during the early evening hours in the summer to provide even more opportunities to visit.

As the society grew, there was fear that it could easily lose touch with members due to the sheer size of the meetings. In response, special interest groups were formed. These clutches of gardeners often meet in each other's homes. The experience has created a close-knit community of gardeners who often become friends as they share their garden knowledge. Sometimes there might be a speaker, but

other times it may just be the group getting together to share gardening tips.

Usually there are three large HPSO meetings a year, and a fee is charged. These meetings feature a well-known local, national or international gardening personality and can attract more than 500 individuals.

In an attempt to meet more of the members' gardening information needs, smaller topical meetings were created — and the Gen(i)us series was formed. The Gen(i)us series features lectures presented by experts on a specific genus. This series is held about every other month and attracts about 100 attendees who pay \$5 per lecture.

Another HPSO-sponsored activity is a garden tour program. Initiated in 1998 by members who had traveled abroad, this program offers the opportunity to join a small group and travel to gardens either

in the U.S. or abroad. These tours are very reasonably priced and usually sell out within days of their announcement.

Yet another popular event is the Annual Study Weekend featuring speakers, private and public garden visits, local nursery stops and dinners. It rotates annually between Victoria or Vancouver, B.C., Seattle, Portland and Eugene.

The largest event for the organization is the spring plant sale called Hortlandia. Held under cover on an early spring weekend, Hortlandia features around 100 specialty nurseries and garden artists displaying and selling their wares. The total gross for last year's sale was more than \$200,000; profits are invested in other society activities.

### Standing tall

Jim noted that there are still challenges to keeping the society alive and vibrant. The average age is about 60, and probably only 5 percent of the members are under 40. This may be partially due to the fact that people are older when they buy their first house and begin to garden.

The current membership is about 65 percent female and 35 percent male, suggesting a large target audience for recruitment. Recently the society entered the social media age and now has a Facebook page, which should assist in attracting younger members.

The Hardy Plant Society of Oregon has been fortunate to have an extremely strong base of volunteers. Certainly, volunteers are the lifeblood of non-profit organizations, and HPSO is no exception.

It wouldn't surprise me that these volunteer members are also frequent customers at their local garden centers. There's a sales opportunity here: If a garden center or grower were to hear of a local garden group in their area, it might behoove them to offer speakers or assist in providing vital gardening information. ☺

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