

Cultivating “partnerships”



BY MARIA ZAMPINI

Master Gardeners and garden writers make great ambassadors for our industry. They are recognized in their communities as the “go-to” person for gardening information.

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Up until September, I'd only been in the great state of Texas on a layover at Dulles airport. But after attending the Garden Writers Association (GWA) Annual Symposium in Dallas, I have one word to say: *hot!* Oh my goodness! I can't even imagine what it is like in the “heat” of the summer!

Just as we find at many events in the horticultural community, everyone at GWA's conference was extremely giving and sharing of their knowledge and expertise. We heard some outstanding speakers on relevant topics and visited some absolutely spectacular private gardens—the “Bali Hai” home and garden boasted both a Bentley and a Benz in a garage in which you could probably have eaten off the floor.

One of the talks I attended was a timely panel presentation titled, “Planting, Growing and Evaluating your Social Media Network,” lead by moderator Dawn Hummel of Kraemer's Nursery, Mt. Angel, Ore.; Marta Maria Garcia of Costa Farms, Goulds, Fla.; and John Riutta of www.wellreadnaturalist.com. I soaked up all I could on this new world of social media, and I also garnered some great tips I plan to incorporate into my own public speaking appearances.

After the talk was done, I caught up with Dawn as well as Jo Roberson of All-American Daylilies (www.allamericandaylilies.com) and Patsy Bell Hobson, a freelance writer from Missouri. I think our lively, loud and animated discussion on marketing, growing, sales and more was certainly eye-opening for us all. And as a personal side note, the discussion also proved that Italians aren't the only ones who talk with their hands!

One of the many things I came away with from our conversation was the reinforcement of something I've felt for quite some time: There is a communication gap between the horticultural industry and those with direct contact to the end consumer, in particular garden writers and Master Gardeners.

Master Gardeners and garden

writers make great ambassadors for our industry. They are recognized in their communities as the “go-to” person for gardening information. Family, friends and neighbors tend to ask them for information about gardening. Do they have the same depth of knowledge of some (but not all) in the nursery industry? Not necessarily. Did they all grow up in a green industry business? Probably not. Have they worked in a green industry business before becoming a Master Gardener or a garden writer? Maybe, maybe not. So what?

There is a communication gap between the horticultural industry and those with direct contact to the end consumer, in particular garden writers and Master Gardeners.

I'll tell you what I do know about them. They are some of the most passionate plant people I've ever met. There is no doubt that they love plants, and their enthusiasm is contagious! And they are willing to learn from those they perceive as “the experts.” Aren't these the type of “customers” we want to be associated with?

I recently spoke to Pam Bennett of The Ohio State University. Pam is part of the Extension Nursery, Landscape and Turf Team and also heads the Master Gardener program in Ohio. She told me that in our state, Master Gardeners are trained through the Extension offices with research-based, nonbiased horticulture information. Topics include botany, plant physiology, entomology, plant pathology, diagnosing plant problems, herbaceous and woody ornamentals, pesticides safety, IPM—and more. In most states, initial training is

50 hours minimum. Volunteers then give back to Extension through a variety of programs, with the main emphasis on educating the public, thus broadening Extension's outreach. Many of the garden writers I know—those who haven't come from a horticultural background—have fostered their love of gardening through a Master Gardener program.

I met a really neat garden writer at another GWA event, a regional meeting in Cincinnati this past May. Her gardening blog/online newsletter, *www.peggystclair.com*, offers a unique perspective of how healing and healthy gardening can be for our bodies and soul. I told Peggy her writing style and theory are so parallel to the recent best-selling book (and hit movie) that maybe her blog should be re-titled, "Eat, Pray, Love, Garden."

The other day I was visiting Peggy's blog, "The Garden as Muse." In her Entry 38 posted on July 12, Peggy wrote about attending the OFA Short Course in Columbus, Ohio, and hearing marketing consultant Holly Buchanan talk on "Marketing to Women in the 21st Century." She chose to attend this talk because, as she understands it, 80 percent of the customers who buy plants and garden supplies are women. The main thing I took away from her OFA post was a reminder that women are our biggest target demographic. The funny thing is, the majority of Master Gardeners and garden writers as well are ... you guessed it! Women. Just one more reason we need to know these groups better.

You know, they say the best advertising is word of mouth. I believe that in today's world we, as growers, garden centers and landscapers, must consider marketing avenues we haven't in the past. We have an out-of-the box opportunity with garden writers and Master Gardeners to help tell our story, help educate and mentor and in return have a direct conduit to the end consumer. Perhaps we can learn a few things ourselves and be inspired by the energy and excitement of these garden lovers.

Ironically, right after GWA, I got tapped to lead a panel discussion at the National Green Centre Show this January on this exact topic. So if you're planning on being in St. Louis, I invite you to join me at "Improving the Communication Loop to Increase Sales: Media, Master Gardeners, Garden Centers and Growers." Together we'll explore further how all parties can work better together to close the communication gap and ensure higher profits and successful, happy customers who will continue to come back again and again for more plants! ♡



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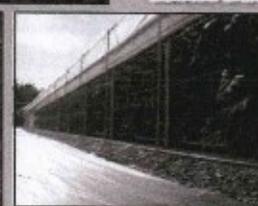
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