



## Welcome to Florida: Lessons Learned from an Introductory Online Gardening Course

WAYNE H. HOBBS\*

*University of Florida/IFAS Extension Clay County, 2463 State Rd. 16 West,  
Green Cove Springs, FL 32043*

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With a population projected to increase by 100,000 in the next 25 years, Clay County, Florida is seeing dynamic growth through an influx of new residents. Many of these citizens are new to Florida and the unique challenges that gardeners face in our climate and our precious resources that will become even more strained in the future. To address the needs of the citizens of Clay County to successfully and sustainably garden in Florida, a 4-week synchronous online course was developed to teach about vegetable gardening, sustainable Florida-Friendly Landscaping, turfgrass management, and the climate and natural resources of the area. The course was run three times in the fall and winter of 2017 into 2018 and data was collected that showed general knowledge gain but there were several challenges that need to be addressed in further online course development such as participants not following through with the course once registered and lowered participation over the length of the course. However, these issues provide an opportunity to strengthen similar courses in the future and for other agents to avoid problems that this course design presented. Throughout the development and implementation of this course, many ideas and methods were tested, leading to strategies to be shared with other extension faculty in how to design and successfully run online courses.

“Welcome to Florida Gardening” was a four-module asynchronous online course designed to meet the needs of new residents and those new to gardening in Clay County, FL. Each module was designed to include a video lecture, discussion forum, applied activity where participants would evaluate their horticultural areas and apply new knowledge, and additional reading and resources. Each module was developed with the constraint that it would take less than three hours for the client to complete and be available for access at any time.

### Materials and Methods

The course was hosted on Schoology, an online Learning Management System with a free-to-use format. This course was repeated three times, in Sept. 2017, Oct. 2017, and Dec. 2017.

### Results and Discussion

Registration, participation, and completion figures are provided in Table 1.

From implementation of the course, several major lessons were apparent in this novel program and ideas for improvement and further research are apparent.

- Lesson 1: Development can take time. The course took the author around 60 h to design and create materials. Approximately 1 hour per week was needed during the course to manage discussions, review assignments, and manage the software.
- Lesson 2: There was demand for the course. The 85 total registrants over the three sections of the course show.
- Lesson 3: Clients did not commit to the course. There was a major drop from registration to participation and also

Table 1. Total registration, participation, and completion data from “Welcome to Florida Gardening” online course presented in 2017 by the University of Florida/IFAS Clay County Extension.

Course section	Registrants	Participants	Completed course	Follow-up surveys
Sept. 2017	8	6	1	1
Oct. 2017	30	10	3	0
Dec. 2017	45	19	2	0

from participation to completion (See Table 1). Due to the low level of completion, data to showcase knowledge gain and course effectiveness could not be accurately collected.

- Lesson 4: Outside factors influenced the course. Hurricane Irma limited access during the September section and all sections had clients inform the author they could not complete the course due to outside issues.
- Lesson 5: Volunteers can help in the implementation of online extension programs. Master Gardeners who enrolled in the online course became highly involved in the forum discussions and helped to answer the questions of other participants.
- Lesson 6: There was interest throughout the state. Participants outside of Clay County and the northeast region of the state registered and participated.
- Lesson 7: There is room for more development and research. The implementation of online extension programming for residential clientele is still fairly new. Possible topics to research include different course formats (asynchronous compared to synchronous as well as length of course), effectiveness of online forums and discussion, utilizing online courses for volunteers, and methods to improve participation and commitment to courses, among others.

\*Corresponding author. Email: whhobbs@ufl.edu