



Shifting Tides: Lessons Learned from Virtual Plant Clinics

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Monroe County contains an archipelago of islands, which extend more than 110 miles offshore from the mainland of Florida. There is only one main coastal highway, the Overseas Highway (U.S. Route 1) that connects all of the islands from Key Largo to Key West. Traveling from the southernmost part of the county, where the main extension office is located, to the northern limits can take up to three hours. Due to these geographical restrictions, shifting programming efforts and plant clinics online in response to COVID-19 has presented new opportunities and opened extension's educational opportunities to a new and diverse audience. Through clientele feedback, we have been able to adapt our services and continue to see increases in participation for online events.

The goal of our virtual plant clinics was to create a platform where Master Gardener volunteers and the extension agent were still able to address our clientele's gardening and landscaping questions and maintain a presence in the community during COVID-19 restrictions, which halted volunteer opportunities and in-person plant clinics.

Materials and Methods

Prior to COVID-19, plant clinics were typically held seven times a month throughout Monroe County at extension offices and other off-site locations. This helped to maximize our availability in the community and offer an easy and informal way of answering any plant questions and concerns through one-on-one consultations between Master Gardener volunteers and Monroe County residents. When these opportunities were restricted, it greatly reduced our reach within the community.

The Environmental Horticulture extension agent and Master Gardener Volunteers started conducting one-hour, online plant clinics every week via Zoom in Apr. 2020. Prior to holding our first online plant clinic, the agent and volunteers met virtually via Zoom for a total of ten hours to strategize and familiarize ourselves with this new platform for programming. When we first started, it was simply an open, virtual space to meet and answer questions, much like the in-person plant clinics. However, we quickly realized the potential for attracting a wider audience and added an educational component to each plant clinic. Starting in July, the format for the plant clinics was modified to include an educational component. Each session began with a 20-min presentation on a topical gardening issue (scales in the landscape, managing plant pests with soaps, fertilizing palms, etc.) then was opened to group discussion for answering clientele questions. The new format was called Plant Clinics Plus. Program participants were also encouraged to send any questions with pictures to the

Master Gardener email address so they could be addressed during the Zoom plant clinic.

In addition to our virtual plant clinics, we also established a dedicated Master Gardener email address and developed a Master Gardener Microsoft Teams page for keeping track of incoming questions and responses, storing fact sheets and documents for quick access, and as a way for Master Gardeners to interact and engage with each other through the chat function within the software.

Results

Thirty four participants attended our ten weekly plant clinics from April through June where we created an open, virtual space for answering resident's plant questions and concerns. Though participation was low, 40% of the participants had never attended previous in-person plant clinics or other extension programming and the other 60% had not engaged with extension within the last 3 years. From July through October, we held 17 virtual Plant Clinics Plus sessions, and a total of 156 participants attended these modified plant clinics, which included 65 Master Gardener Volunteers.

The new format also became a tool for introducing Florida Friendly Landscaping principles and to offer sustainable solutions for managing pests in the landscape and to introduce residents to a wider plant palette, including native plants. While 90% reported knowledge gained through the educational component of the new plant clinic format, 30% also indicated the adoption of at least one Florida-Friendly, sustainable landscaping practice which included proper identification, reducing pesticide use, and using more environmentally friendly options for controlling pests.

In addition, 30% of the Master Gardener Volunteers that participated in this new online format, had not previously volunteered at plant clinics due challenges getting to the various physical locations throughout the county and a feeling of unease answering residents' questions. One hundred percent of Master Gardener Volunteers that attended the online plant clinics reported knowledge gained and increased confidence in responding to clientele plant questions.

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Conclusion

Even though many residents that had previously engaged in our in-person plant clinics did not participate in the new online plant clinics, we were able to greatly expand our reach to a wider audience that had not previously attended any extension

programming. Also, adding an educational component to each of the plant clinic sessions, received a lot of positive feedback from residents and Master Gardeners alike and increased participation in the program substantially. Moving forward, as we move back into in-person programming, we will find ways to offer hybrid programs, like our plant clinics, to engage a wider audience.