

SUCCESS STORIES

UAF Cooperative Extension Service

Combined training brings Master Gardener course to Sitka, strengthens Southeast ties

Issue

The agriculture and horticulture Extension agent based in Sitka retired in 2013 and the office was reorganized as an outreach center without an agent. Research-based gardening education in the community was piecemeal and infrequent, despite high interest in the topic.

Response

The first Master Gardener class to be offered in Sitka in eight years was organized by Sitka Program Assistant Jasmine Shaw and University of Alaska Southeast Professor Kitty LaBounty. The course was to begin in March, but this coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seemed like yet another year would pass without a Master Gardener class. However, with a heightened community concern about food security, they forged ahead with an online version.

Restructuring the course was not easy because the program is very hands-on. Gardening is simply not done behind a computer screen. Fortunately, the Juneau District Master Gardener course, which had begun in February, had also switched to an online format. The classes joined forces and shared resources and guest speakers. Sitka-specific sessions were added to those that Juneau agent Darren Snyder had already in place, to personalize the experience and allow Sitka gardeners to “catch up” with their Juneau counterparts.

Results

The course ended in May with a highly motivated group of gardeners ready to complete at least 40 hours of volunteer time in their communities. The ending of the combined course did not sever the new ties this group had made. A positive outcome is the “Garden



A Sitka greenhouse provided plants for the Master Gardener training.

Happy Hour Zoom.” This is a bimonthly informal gathering of many of the gardeners who completed the training, as well as other interested community members, primarily from Sitka, Juneau and Haines. One frequent participant said: “This is my favorite event ever — it is like going to church every two weeks.” All participants, including the organizers, look forward to these sessions as a way to continue to exchange gardening ideas and to maintain hope for the future.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Agriculture,
Natural Resources
and Extension