

The Big Questions Surrounding How to Put on a Successful Public Seed Exchange,

A #GWA2018 Round Table Topic Discussion Handout by Paul Haden

Seed Exchange: Who?

Who is going to attend your seed exchange? Explore your *realistic* target potential attendees. Are there enough folks interested in gardening or growing their own plants from seed in your local area to support a seed exchange event? Let's face it, most folks that buy plants for their US landscape today purchase whole potted plants (not seed). Typically, gardeners are more likely to start some of their edible crops from seed than they are ornamental crops. Interestingly, at many non-specialty seed exchanges, while edibles and easy-to-grow wildflowers are consistently popular, one of the smaller turn-out categories tends to be woody crops, cacti/succulents, or tropicals. Some things can be grown by seed, but mature faster to blooming size from other propagules, such as naturalizing flower bulbs. So, in some cases seed growing is the less popular choice and more difficult challenge. Are your locals up to the fun challenge?

Despite being easier than most people think it is, it takes a certain type of person to have the willpower, patience and optimism to grow a plant from a tiny little seed into a healthy, mature specimen. Many newbies give up on seedling raising after killing something at a juvenile stage instead of simply trying again with modified habits or conditions to better success. People new to growing plants from seed need a little positive reinforcement and encouragement, which they can readily find at a seed exchange event where veteran gardeners and newbies alike can mingle with no pressure. Those who attend are already in the 'sharing' frame of mind: sharing seeds, experiences, stories and the desire to grow new, interesting things that enhance their lives.

Who is going to help you plan, set up, and execute your event? As multi-talented as you are, you cannot be multiple places at once and do absolutely everything. Delegate at least some tasks to trusted coworkers, volunteers, and/or friends. Try not have family work under you in key positions.

Who is going to help take down your event? You are still going to be taking down your own tables, signage, and any temporary chairs at the venue; however, if you have donated items and product samples as your décor to set the mood, then the attending public will help take down that décor during the event by winning the items as desirable door prizes and timely contest winner awards. If you are lacking staff or event management volunteers, ask for help taking down the event infrastructure near the beginning of the event. Usually, a couple people will commit to helping and stick around to do so. Don't exclusively rely on those who sign up to attend your event on social media or announce their intent to volunteer at say a club meeting to always show up and stay long enough to carry out the full extent of their intended duties. In reality, unpaid people often show up late, leave early, wander off to chat with someone, or don't show up. Make do with who you have on-hand. Show those folks how much you really appreciate their efforts during and after the event. Keep things light and fun.

For any infrastructure or décor you intend to reuse again in future events, carefully store those items where you can readily find them later. Always have someone with legible handwriting label your storage boxes or bags on multiple sides. If you don't put the date/location on your signage, it can be used multiple times, even at a different venue. Directional lead-in or exchange table category designation signs, for example, can be made well once and used for years if stored properly. I wood-

burned our 2-sided table designators out of slices of cut up tree trunk from the venue's parking lot renovation project, then had the professional sign company produce our reduced cost banners with the tree trunk slice image as a backdrop to similar lettering to coordinate them all.

When planning a larger event, ***who are going to be your reliable go-to project or site managers, helpers, or even greeters?*** A smoothly organized and run event sets a positive experience for all and attracts return attendees, helpers and even venues for future years. When real life quirks and unexpected challenges happen, who are your cool, calm and collective problem solvers, efficient operators, and optimism enablers? Get to know your coworkers, volunteers and return attendees who can help answer questions from newbies. Some of this year's enthusiastic attendees might like to help you run the same event next year. Keep contact with them through social media venues.

Who is going to be the public center of attention emcee that 'runs the show'? Many plant people are introverts, so often the event coordinator or manager is not necessarily the talking figurehead during the event itself. The job of the emcee is to officially welcome everyone, introduce what a seed exchange event is for newbies, explain how today's event will play out, introduce any guest speakers, start any activities, contests or silent auctions, then conclude each of those in a positive way that thanks everyone for coming while building interest for next year's follow up event. Be sure to thank all of your sponsors, donors and attendees for their part in making this seed exchange a great one. Encourage everyone to showcase their positive experience to others in-person and via social media posts so that you personally don't have to do all of the positive public relations work. Don't run the show; but rather, let the show run itself with proper encouragement and choice opportunities to do great things.

Who are going to be your co-sponsors? Seed exchanges that rely on strictly the attendees to bring in seeds for trading sometimes do not fare well compared to those that start out with a decent supply of supplemental seed donated by companies, organizations and individuals. People tend to bring leftovers of common crops, so in smaller exchanges it's possible to have only a handful of common crops because everyone happens to bring say lettuce, squash and cucumber seed. Purposely supplement (or 'seed') your exchange with providers of rare plants, heirlooms, new introductions, AAS winners, and so on to ensure a wide variety of products to choose from. Seed exchanges get even stronger when you then add in individuals who grow and harvest their own seed crops, which happen to not be commercially available any more. You can build your event stronger by notifying the right combination of providers, from companies to individuals, and personally inviting a wide variety of professionals and hobbyists alike. Invite the staffs, members and guests of local botanical gardens, museums, nature interest groups, and others. Some groups, such as the local garden clubs, scouts, and so on can be a sponsor or featured part of your efforts with representatives and/or displays at the seed exchange. People who already support those groups or venues, such as annual paying members, tend to come out to events the staff/ volunteers present or participate actively in. At the 2018 CVSE for example, we had trade show style informational display tables from Agecroft Hall, Maymont, Monticello, the Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants, the VA Federation of Garden Clubs, and others; some manned by reps from those non-profit organizations. The more groups you have involved, the more marketing opportunities, attendees, and interactive experiences your event will potentially have. Sometimes your biggest supporters turn out to be the most unpredictable people, organizations, or businesses.

Who are going to be your donors? The face of our industry is changing quickly with multiple providers going out of business, being bought out, or merging with others every year. I obtained the contact data

for every mail order or online garden plant seed provider in the US in 2017; and of the ones that wrote me back, a shocking dozen or more were no longer going to conduct business in the 2018 growing season. Also, I found that the generosity tendencies quoted about certain providers were not always true of that same provider to me; so I'm not going to list sample companies, organizations or individuals as reliable, always-generous sources. Instead, I will advise to open-mindedly try as many sources as you dare contact, because you really do find some neat ones and some great people willing to help out your cause all over the country. For example, I found one in-region provider that I had never heard of before that turned out to have interesting crops, great customer service, and exceptional seed packet art that drove me to display their best work in picture frames as an improvised quilt-like pattern at our packet splitting table. A bigger risk to potential donors, when you hold your very first seed exchange and have no reputation built yet, there is no proven history to show that you will indeed draw a given anticipated crowd, a huge volume of packets, or similar data many providers inquire about before mailing you free or at-cost sample seed (or other propagules) to disperse to the public. They typically want to know about your tax exempt status (or not), event attendance draw, traditional media coverage, social media coverage, any activities or displays involving their product line, and where any leftover seed packets will be donated to after the event, among other common questions.

Packets of seed, dormant bulbs and other appropriate plant propagules (or even whole sample seedlings) can be effectively solicited from multiple sources if you ask far enough in advance of your event to go through all of the proper processes determined by each provider, which can come from retailers, wholesalers, growers, or individuals. Each provider has a different policy on how they give to whom, and even which employees are assigned to make those decisions. Home Depot, for example, here locally had the assistant store manager in charge of donations instead of the general store manager or regional manager. Despite having rarely shopped there personally, Home Depot gave us \$200 worth of seed, a couple dozen bulk bags of dormant flower bulbs, a whole huge box of bagged dormant peonies, and a gift certificate to use as a prize. In contrast, nearly identical Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse, which I do a tremendous amount of purchases at for work and home projects, makes those decisions at their corporate headquarters after a bunch of red tape months in advance of the event, then authorize the store manager to execute the donations, of which we got none. You cannot assume similar businesses will make similar donations or sponsorship efforts, nor that places you frequent will give more support than competitors that you don't shop at. Run your solicitation efforts as equal opportunity ventures, because the results will often surprise you. I will say that almost every donor indicated in response to my event follow-up report to them that they would again support our CVSE efforts in 2019, and to just let them know of the date to send items by. Thank you notes, pictures, and event stories about their products in-use really are effective communications.

Who is going to help you market your upcoming seed exchange event? By having one or more businesses or organizations sponsor all or some aspect of your seed exchange, those sponsors with resources invested will help advertise your event beforehand, perhaps craft social media posts live during it, and do post-event follow-up statistical data or marketing to show how you all together positively contributed to the community. Use the event as a catalyst to contribute to charities that touch your local communities, and the news story becomes those charitable contributions raised while families had fun at your event. Challenge local businesses, organizations and individuals to contribute to local charities based upon your event's attendance head count, the final seed packet count on your exchange tables, and so on. Similarly, challenge potential donors or sponsors to match the seed packet

count handed over to local, plant-utilizing non-profit organizations, which can be showcased with educational display tables at your event venue. As an interdisciplinary tie-in, contact all appropriate nature interest groups in your region (like bird, honey bee or butterfly interest groups) and see which ones want to participate in being showcased at your seed exchange with manned tables or a brief talk.

Who is going to set out the attendee-brought seed out as the public arrives with their exchange tables contributions? Before your event, decide whether the public sets out their own seed brought, or if your event management staff or volunteers sort and arrange the incoming seed. If you are running your first small event by yourself, have the public place their own seed on categorized tables or table sections to save on man-power. In larger events, volunteers tend to sort the seed and check them for legality, invasive species content, if they are too far past date, if the package is ripped or open, and so on.

Seed Exchange: What?

What kinds of plants will you encourage or discourage the public to bring in or donors to send?

Is your seed exchange all-inclusive or will you restrict it just to certain categories of crops? Some seed exchanges, for example, forbid invasive species in their area. Some encourage only organic seed or just edibles and herbs. Some exchanges encourage hand collected, labeled seed from participant yards while others only want retailer-available crops with photos and detailed labels. It's up to you...

What is your policy on packet-splitting? Some exchange events limit incoming seed to only full, sealed, clean, dry, properly labeled, close to use-by date seed packets. Conversely, others allow refolded partial packets that may be older with lower germination rates. If you encourage/allow packet splitting, have a convenient designated place, such as over a clean boot tray at a sturdy table, where multiple people can divide up and correctly label the contents to a shared interest crop packet in a fair way. Provide something like snack-sized Ziplock bags with write-on tabs and a Sharpie for such a purpose. Even if you ask the crowd to kindly bring their own packets, bags, or sealable containers, someone always neglects to do so; so, have a few free sealable bags, corked tiny bottles, or even tiny Tupperware containers donated by a local store on-hand for just such an occasion as backup.

What will people be willing to sponsor or donate? Sponsorship and donation opportunities are everywhere, beyond just garden supplies. Going for the 'wow' factor, we had a big event planned with multiple in-event activities and still did the whole 2018 CVSE for under \$500 because we creatively asked the right vendors for donations of all kinds of supplies, especially arts and crafts items for our Children's Activities Table. Target, for example had tons of great stuff for under \$5 for kid's prizes and activity supplies, which made it affordable for people to sponsor items or activities they had interest in. We attached a sponsor name to almost every activity we did, based upon who donated what supplies or prize. For example, we had the Richmond Habitat for Humanity Restore "Gardener's Plant Everything but the Kitchen Sink" Battle hasty sink planting competition, so named because the 5 sinks we reused (from recent facilities renovations on-site) were to be donated to the local Restore after a thorough cleaning; and to coordinate, the winning team got a Home Depot gift certificate to buy more plants or building materials. The event's temporary printed paper signage had Home Depot's mascot Homer saying 'Thank You!' beside the Habitat for Humanity Restore logo. Over 50 small potted plants were bought on sale or donated from several local retailers, who were represented by the logo-ed tags being left in the audience volunteer created compositions. The hilarious event was broadcast live on Facebook so that their friends, relatives, donating stores, and the public could cheer the teams on as they fought

playfully over the same common-use supplies via different strategies to create artistic planted combinations in under 5 minutes, name them, then present them. Your seed exchange does not have to be completely about seeds, but rather show that gardening together can be great fun...

What is your policy on how many packets (or how much seed) attendees can take during the whole event or at a given time? Be prepared to issue some simple, fair guidelines on how many packets, bottles, or bags of seed each individual can take at various stages of your event. At the CVSE this year, we had an “I Call Dibs Run” as a fair first collection effort where each participant scurried to the tables and collected only one most-desired, sought after packet. We then asked if anyone in the audience wanted something they saw someone else grab first, and in such a case asked the multiple parties to politely share the low supply, high demand crops at the seed packet splitting table. After that, we had a pick some, leave some policy at all tables with timed browsing. Finally, we allowed interested parties to take more of their higher quantity crops of interest that remained on the exchange tables.

What do you do with the leftover seed on the exchange tables at the end of the exchange? They can be donated to charities, churches, non-profit organizations, local community gardens, assisted living centers with memory enhancement gardens, public school programs, and so on. If nothing else, start or donate to an existing local plant seed library in your region, where people check out a certain cultivar of plant seed, and return collected seed of that same cultivar at the end of the growing season. Finally, report to donors where the seed went, as providers often want to share on their own media relations how their product lines were used to generate good in the community.

Seed Exchange: When?

When do you start planning your seed exchange and organizing the event? The 2018 CVSE came together by need in only 2 months, but I would highly recommend your first seed exchange event be planned out a half a year to a full year beforehand because the solicitation and pre-event marketing take much longer to happen than you might think. (Visit other seed exchanges around the country first so that you can experience what they are like for yourself, because each one is run so different with differing feels, strengths, weaknesses, pros and cons.) Many seed companies take weeks to months to respond to requests instead of just days. Often, promised products then take weeks to months to be processed, then shipped to you, sometimes not even arriving until after your event. Once in possession, these products take a while to inventory on a spread sheet, sort and store in alphabetized bundles accordingly. You want to do this so that you know what you have and can tell the public about it to get more bodies in the door on event day, but also to thank the donors for each product as follow up. The more organization you have beforehand, such as pre-alphabetizing box after cardboard box of seed packets, the easier and quicker your setup process will be.

When should you start/stop the solicitation process for donated seed, supplies, and décor for your seed exchange? If you do choose to supplement what seeds the public will bring in, remember to have sufficient storage space for the collected donated items, and label the outside of the shipping boxes as they arrive (because they all look like the same cardboard when stacked). Most publishers, seed and garden tool companies wanted requests a minimum of 4 weeks before the actual event of need. Similarly, for the CVSE event we had a 4-week minimum window for local grocer headquarters to consider whether they wanted to match our event food drive’s final can-count. Writing custom letters takes time, so start a few months before your event, and stop 30 days out; as US mail shipping of most

items requested does take 8-10 business days after the source decides to agree to your request. Donors who issue free product shipping as part of their gift will typically use the slower ground transportation mail service options. If you need hurried delivery, then folks will usually have you as the recipient pay for faster UPS, FedEx or DHL shipping. Local suppliers often don't mind if you pick up their donations in person at their facility, but arrange it days before the intended pick-up.

Seed Exchange: Where?

Where will you hold the seed exchange? Ideally, you want to hold the event in a free or low-cost venue that has the capacity to hold your expected crowd and is most convenient to your target audience. It should have ample parking and bathrooms available for your attendees, plus easy access to get bulky items in and out of the event room or space. If during the cold season, it should be inside for the comfort of the attendees, but many spring or autumn ones are outdoors. Provide a backup tent with sides for protection if your seed exchange is to be held outdoors in case of rain, high wind and such.

Where will people park, go to the bathroom, find handicapped access, and more? Choose the right site, and all of this is taken care of on-site. Find others willing to help you out in obtaining a venue that fits your needs within your budget. Many spaces, such as gardens, parks, arboreta, historic estates, museums, and even businesses will be glad to host your event if you work together with them far in advance to set it up and market it together. Some people start out small in their own personal yard or place of business and grow from there. Once the event attracts too many people for a smaller capacity venue, such as your own yard, then you have to move on if you want the event to grow.

Where do you place the seed, product literature or free garden reference books, door prizes, silent auction items (if applicable), etc? Having attended various types of seed exchanges, I have found that I prefer to have the exchange seed on central tables, accessible on both sides versus only being accessible on one side. Separate out anything that you do not want the public to take as free-grabs. For example, you do not want your silent auction or door prize items on the same tables as the plant parts folks are in a hurried frenzy to grab. Have those on a controlled, supervised table or deep window sill.

Where will your attendees come from? It's safe to say that, in general, folks will not drive more than an hour to attend an event that can last anywhere from a few minutes to a couple hours. If you market effectively well ahead of time, you are more probable to have attendees arriving from further away for special items, prizes, talks, or fun activities that you advertise having. For example, at the 2018 CVSE event, we had attendees from just over 200 miles away that drove 3.5 hours to get there because they knew me and we advertised some really neat seed donations, activities and such. I have been to seed exchanges that had 5 to 100 people, and a festival that included a seed exchange as part of it that had over 500 attendees that day. The more activities that you can tie into your exchange, like produce harvest tastings or educational sessions, the more attendees will likely show up. One I attended at a coffee shop literally had less than a dozen people stop in 4 hours. Timing and location are extremely important, followed by content and activities announced as secondary motivators.

Where will your target audience first hear about your seed exchange event? That is up to you. The CVSE had a 'how did you hear about us?' inquiry on the sign-in sheet (that also wanted to know attendees' names, where they were from, and what crops they brought with them today). What we found was interesting. Most attendees indicated that they first heard about us from another person, most of which who initially saw pre-event posting on social media outlets. Few wrote down about the

numerous community event calendars (tv, radio and online) we posted on for free or the traditional flyers placed in public spaces like libraries and garden centers. Word of mouth was number one. However, I interestingly only knew a handful of the attendees. Almost all were strangers to not only me, but to each other. It was interesting to see an odd cross-section of the local region get to know one another, bonding over the common interest of learning how to garden with plants new to them, because we had everything from rare heirlooms to current season new introductions on the tables from earned sources all over America. After you hold your first seed exchange, the driving motivator should be word of mouth from your prior event. Second should be reminder social media posts as donations roll in, you prepare for new event themes, activities, speakers, and more. When a really neat donation comes in, photograph it and post about it for others to get excited about as well, because excitement is contagious. Stating that you will have a silent auction to benefit local charities is bland and boring, but showing some cool bidding items or experiences that will be contained within that fundraising effort is quite effective at getting people to show up.

Seed Exchange: Why?

Why should you hold the seed exchange? If there are no other active seed exchanges within say 100 miles of your current residence or work location, then chances are you have the local market cornered. If you have competing seed exchanges close by, consider either helping run theirs, or run yours at a completely different time of the growing season so that yours are not in direct competition with one another. It's ok and even encouraged to attend multiple seed exchange events within a region because some historic heirloom crops are only dispersed from person to person sharing, not within the traditional nursery trade. For example, we picked up seed from a record setting Atlantic Giant pumpkin last winter because plant people know people that know other people. Seed that has an interesting backstory and history tends to come from seed exchanges as oral or first-hand written story-telling, whereas when you buy from a generic catalog, that sense of personal connection and story is lost. Seed exchanges create opportunities to bud and cultivate lifelong relationships.

Why should the public come to your new seed exchange? Often, saying that attendees can come with seed and leave with abundant different seed is not enough. What's in it for them, both long and short term? The general public wants free stuff, to learn, and have safe fun. If you can capture and hold their attention with entertaining, but educational presentations and interactive activities, then they will not only stay the whole time, but report good experiences at your seed exchange to others as follow-up. You can choose to have your seed exchange to be child friendly with neat activities. Finger food like fruit can be a great motivator and help carry out a plant-based product theme. Having people playfully compete against one another in almost anything, from naming something to creating their own name tags or potting up containers of sample plants, works well by interactively including them and creating a sense of pride. Something as simple as asking, then announcing, who came from the furthest away, who brought the most contribution seeds, who had the most unusual plant, or who had the most interesting attire on (a plant themed ugly sweater, a decorated hat or full blown costume contest) creates human interest and sentimentality for the event and return guests the next year. If people just show up, swipe a bunch of seed packets and leave, then they have no sentimentality about the event, nor a positive connection to others attending that event. Activities that encourage discussion and interactions with others help create relationships with others in the community.

Seed Exchange: How?

How many categories of plants do you want to divide incoming seed packets into and have tables labeled for appropriately? At the CVSE event for example, we had ornamental annuals, ornamental perennials, fruits/vegetables, and herbs to choose from. Some folks simply divide edibles from ornamentals, while others divide out native species, pollinator friendly plants, and so on. On each table, at least for the pre-event donated seed packets, one of the easier ways for guests to find their desired seed crops for acquisition is to alphabetize the crops by either Latin or common name. Newbies to gardening often don't know the Latin names (which many times are not shown on the packaging of edible crops); so exchanges catering to new gardeners tend to arrange crops by common name.

How do you pull your first seed exchange off? Make it as easy and simple as possible with a clear concept and execution. Make sure all involved in helping you understand your goals and outlined execution plan. Have the public version of the Events Timeline posted in poster size somewhere obvious in your event venue space for easy reference. If an activity takes place in a difference space, make it clear when and where, and how to get to that space from the sign location. Everyone involved in running the seed exchange needs to know what will happen where and when for public inquiry assistance, especially if you have parking lot or entry point door greeters. Public perception is everything, so make sure they fully understand what is going on and that they have a safe, good time. Not everyone staffing the event needs to know the identity and characteristics on the plants on display or available for exchange. The great thing about a seed exchange where folks bring seed to get seed is that someone in the room always knows more about that crop in question than you do because they brought it. Typically, at least someone else present has successfully grown and harvested each crop in-person locally before.

How do you decide who gets what? I operated the CVSE event as if it were an open floor trade show with light food options and educational display tables of participating non-profit organizations on the edges of the space with some seating available. The audience was divided in half by even or odd birthdate and given half an hour to browse and collect seed from one themed room, then flip to the opposite room for the second session with a pick some, leave some concept (until close to the end). Some seed exchanges do the opposite and have everyone sit down in a central area, and get up in some random but fair division of folks to have a few at a time browsing the tables for 1 item or a few at a time to then leave most of it for later folks. One exchange I attended had an open house concept where people showed up at random over a 4 hour window of time instead of a set starting time, contributed something and left with something else. At the 2018 CVSE, we had a seed packet splitting table to divvy up low supply, high demand crops fairly, so all could leave happy and supplied with cool crops. To figure out who gets to go first if not everyone at the same time, I have seen exchange hosts ask the crowd who came from the furthest hometown, who brought the most seed in to trade, and so on... With small attendance, just let everyone go at the same time, obtain one most desired item, ask if anyone else wanted something out of supply, then politely ask everyone to moderate themselves for the rest of the event. If you feel like you need an enforcer, feel free to have a Catholic nun with a fast hand standing at each table end with a ruler, ready to rap the knuckles of greedy offenders who take everything they see. Whack.... Many seed exchanges actually have the opposite problem where there are seed packets and hand filled bags leftover, which need forever homes where they will be used and loved by folks who in turn will share future set seeds with others.