

Better Together

| Kate Copsey

>> Published Date: 4/25/2012

When Dr. Neil Reid, Director of the Urban Affairs Center, University of Toledo, received a grant to help the area greenhouse and nursery industry, his first task was to find out what challenges the industry faced. The diversity of the cluster group includes wholesale and retail establishments across a five-county area of northwest Ohio, but in 2003 when the initiative started and Maumee Valley Growers was formed, many of the businesses faced similar challenges. For independent nurseries, many of which are multi-generational, the common issues were concerned with money, time and marketing, whereas the larger greenhouses had problems with rising costs to heat the greenhouses.

Dr. Reid enjoyed working with the group, but did admit that organizing these individuals was “sometimes challenging because the independent nursery owners were just that—independent!” he says. They were used to solving their own problems, liked to be in control of all aspects of the business, and were not always ready to trust a group to make the decisions. However, by 2009 more than 80% of those that did participate in the group reported benefitting from the organization. Additionally, at the end of the grant period in August of 2011, 55% of the participants were optimistic about the industry compared to just 27% in 2004.

The first major project for one team to work on was to reduce heating costs to the large greenhouses. Typically each owner spent hours researching the lowest provider of heat, and making the best guess possible at the amount of fuel they would need in the upcoming year. As a group, this burden was lifted from the individual and the buying power of the group enabled a lower cost for everyone.

Current Maumee Valley Growers president, Tom Wardell of Wardell's Garden Center, Waterville, Ohio.



Marketing was likewise worked on. The university provided education and helped to fund marketing initiatives. Tom Wardell is the current president of Maumee Valley Growers and is the owner of Wardell's Garden Center on the north side of Waterville, Ohio. Like many independent garden centers, he was not able to justify more than one or two small advertisements in the city newspaper each season. These tended to get lost on the page. As Maumee Valley Growers, the independent nurseries could buy a full-page advertisement, which had much greater visual impact and reflected a far higher return on the investment.

Jenny Amstutz is the store manager for Nature's Corner nursery, which is a busy urban nursery on the west side of Toledo. The nursery already had an established marketing program that included both print and television media, but she enjoys knowing there is an organization behind her who “are vocal for the green industry” in the area and a resource if she has questions. Tom Oberhouse has a 280-acre tree and shrub farm where he sells to both wholesale and retail markets. His North Branch nursery is located well south of the city, and is far more rural than Nature's Corner. He, too, felt the same appreciation for a professional organization and he did take part in some of the promotional efforts.

Smaller niche nurseries such as Jan Hunter's Naturally Native Nursery not only benefited from general marketing ideas, but she was also able to come up with a marketing plan to sell a selection of native plants through some of the other Maumee Valley Grower's nurseries. Along with the other growers, Naturally Native Nursery is listed on the back of the popular Maumee Valley Grower's calendar, which is a free publication distributed through nurseries and nature centers across the region.

The group's website, www.maumeevalley.com, includes information on growing native plants in the region, plus information on the popular Plant Purple—Grow Hope campaign, which helps to fund research for pancreatic cancer; an initiative to promote locally grown food; and a plant container recycling program.

As with all organizations, some nurseries benefit more from the initiatives than others. However, overall, the vision of Dr. Reid, along with the many volunteer hours from those in the group, has produced a way for the northwest Ohio green industry to celebrate its individual talents and maintain their unique characteristics, while also giving them a common voice in the region. **GP**

Kate Copsey is a freelance garden writer and host of “America's Home Grown Veggie Show.” She can be reached at www.katecopsey.com.