



Tucson Garden Center: 'People like this kind of learning'

Some visitors who have picked up helpful ideas at the Tucson Garden Center remark that they are glad they discovered what the center has to offer.

"When they tag those comments with, 'and I never knew the university had this kind of facility,' it always surprises me," says garden center horticulturist George Brookbank. "Some days, especially in early summer, it seems that everyone and his brother know about the garden center and have questions about plants."

The center's three-person staff took more than 120 phone calls a day several times this June. The year-round average is about 60 callers daily. Other people just stop by the garden center at 4040 North Campbell Avenue. In addition, scheduled demonstrations on specific topics once a week attract about 50 visitors, on average, and more than 100 for popular topics such as planting roses or pruning grapevines.

The public's questions range from "What's wrong with my tomato plant?" to "Will camellias grow in Tucson?" to "Where can I buy ratchet clippers?"

More than half of the questions, or the answers to them, have to do with watering plants correctly and conservingly. Watering problems may masquerade as salt stress (from never watering deeply), root

Photograph: George Brookbank leads a weekly demonstration at the Tucson Garden Center. (Photo by Ted Bundy.)

deterioration (from too-frequent watering) or a clinic full of other symptoms. Tucsonans are increasingly conscious of water conservation, too, says Brookbank. When water rates rose recently, he saw a distinct increase in questions about drip irrigation systems that reduce waste.

Commercial landscapers and nurserymen, as well as home gardeners, make use of information from the garden center.

The garden center is one facet of the Pima County Cooperative Extension Service, affiliated with the county government, the University of Arizona and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Brookbank and fellow horticulturist Jack Kelly lead the center's programs and answer most questions. Secretary Billie Hundtoft handles some of the frequent questions and the requests for publications.

Self-Help Facilities

Visitors to the garden center can learn much on their own, besides asking questions. The plantings of vegetables and fruits are labeled by varieties, so a walk through the garden and orchard helps visitors see which varieties look hardy in Tucson's climate. Displays show how drip irrigation systems and simple composting bins can be put together and used.

The center has a reading room with a rack of free Extension Service publications, shelves of books and magazines, and many current seed and supply catalogues.

Visitors can try their hand at sensing the depth of soil moisture with a simple iron rod. Understanding the way soils hold and carry moisture is a key to success in watering lawns, trees or gardens.

Many Tucsonans also get information from the garden center without contacting it. Kelly writes a weekly garden column in the *Tucson Citizen* and Brookbank writes one in *The Arizona Daily Star*. Also, when the weather freezes or caterpillars invade or similar minor crises hit town, TV and newspaper reporters often ask the horticulturists for immediate advice to pass along to the public.

The garden center is unique in Arizona. It started in 1973 with a broad-based program recommended by the Extension Advisory Board of county residents. Now, the users of the center help determine its activities.

"The more questions we answer the more we get," says Brookbank. "The ideas that are sown seem to sprout roots, spread branches and scatter their own seeds that result in a whole new crop of people seeking information."

For example, the types of questions callers ask help determine the topics for the weekly newspaper columns. Taking some 300 to 500 questions a week gives Kelly and Brookbank a fair sample of current concerns. The columns, in turn, usually prompt more phone calls from people who want additional details or related information.

Weekly Demonstrations

Some techniques, such as grafting and pruning, are easier to explain in person than in writing or on the phone. Topics for the weekly demonstration programs are selected on that basis, says Brookbank. Recent topics have included how to plant citrus trees, how to grow peppers and how to care for native landscape plants. Other programs use the center's plants for comparisons and illustration. June programs demonstrated "You Can Grow Apples in Tucson," and "Summer



Stress on Tomatoes.”

The demonstrations begin at 10 a.m. Wednesdays at the center. In summer, they usually take the form of garden walks. The varieties being tested are viewed and tasted by the visitors.

Except in summer, a second demonstration is offered each week at the Ott YMCA on the east side of Tucson. The Men's Garden Club of Green Valley arranges a weekly demonstration program in that community.

These programs are also an opportunity for people to bring their plant problems for diagnosis. The process of identifying the problem and suggesting treatment becomes an open forum in which many people can learn from the experience of each other.

“Our aim is to help people learn how to answer their own questions about growing plants,” says Brookbank. “When a caller asks how often he should water his cypress tree, he may at first feel let down that there is no easy ‘every week’ or ‘every 17 days’ answer. But when he learns to consider how far the roots go, how deep the water goes, and even how to check the soil below the surface, he can estimate water needs for many plants, not just that tree. People usually like this kind of learning.”

When necessary and feasible, the garden center horticulturists spend time with individuals on a one-to-one basis. They have helped review homeowners' plans for landscaping or for home-yard irrigation systems, for example. Many requests are for diagnosis of a plant problem. When other methods have failed to solve a serious problem, they sometimes visit a site to make more specific recommendations. This step is especially valuable when commercial landscaping companies or nurseries face stubborn problems that threaten to cause expensive losses.

The Tucson Garden Center sits in the midst of a million-dollar industry of nurseries, greenhouses, landscapers and plant-care businesses. It is on part of the university's Campbell Avenue Farm, which gives it a peaceful atmosphere within the urban setting.

Brookbank encourages people to stop by the center or to call 628-5628. He adds, “We're always glad to see new people finding out what we have to offer.”



Far left: Jack Kelly talks with visitors about the pepper varieties growing at the garden center.

Center: Brookbank diagnoses a tree's problem based on sample leaves brought by its owner.

Right: Ivy Corey of Pima County's Extension Service office (left) helps garden center visitor John Curry find a leaflet about growing grapes. (Photos by Ted Bundy, center, and Guy Webster.)