

Success Stories

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

Gardeners turn to Planttalk Colorado™

Concise and reliable answers to frequently asked gardening questions are the goal of the program coordinated by CSU Extension, the Denver Botanic Gardens, and Green Industries of Colorado.

Situation

When is the best time to divide perennials? What insects are beneficial? Do upside-down tomato containers actually work? Many homeowners routinely ask these types of questions of local garden center employees, Colorado Master Gardeners, and other gardening experts. Successful gardening in Colorado's diverse climate depends on consistent, accurate, and research-based information.

Extension's Response

Answering the same questions over and over again prompted the creation of coordinated messages. In the fall of 1997, Jim Klett, CSU Extension specialist in landscape horticulture, initiated a partnership with the Green Industries of Colorado and the Denver Botanic Gardens to develop an on-demand information service called Planttalk Colorado™. Klett is the program's organizational lead.

With nearly 200 topics, Planttalk was the first of its kind to offer Colorado gardeners instant access to basic gardening information, 24/7, through a toll-free telephone service. Program developers collectively selected topics, wrote scripts, and reviewed and approved content before having them recorded. Agreement from all partners guaranteed that information shared around the state was unified and consistent.

In the program's first year, brochures announcing the toll-free service were distributed at ProGreen EXPO (an annual trade show for green industry professionals), through municipal water bill mailers, and at garden centers.

Consumer use of Planttalk Colorado™ steadily grew as changes in technology expanded and improved access to Planttalk information:

- **Website Migration:** In 2001, Planttalk also became an online information source. More than 400 topics were updated and added to the CSU Extension website. In 2002, www.planttalk.org was launched. In 2007, the telephone service was eliminated.
- **Language Translations:** In 2004, Spanish translation of more than 100 of the most frequently accessed topics was accomplished and made available through the phone system and online.
- **Social Media:** Many scripts are now available as podcasts and are distributed through an RSS feed. Several videos have been developed that are posted on YouTube (www.ext.colostate.edu/ptlk/youtube.html).

Comprehensive publicity has steadily increased consumer use of Planttalk Colorado™ within CSU Extension at the county level via brochures, bookmarks, pull-up banners and table top displays as well as through green industry partners and events. In 2012, for example, Planttalk Colorado™ plant tags were placed in potted plants that were sold at garden centers across the Front Range.



The Bottom Line

- Planttalk Colorado™ is the only on-demand access source to unbiased, science-based information that is concise, easy to understand, specific to Colorado gardeners, and vetted by CSU Extension and other leading horticulture experts in the state.
- For more than a decade, CSU Extension has ensured the growth and development of Planttalk Colorado™ by keeping pace with changes in technology and user preferences.

By the Numbers

Reported in 2012:

- Number of Planttalk Colorado™ tags placed in potted plants sold at garden centers: 34,000
- Total number of Planttalk Colorado™ scripts: more than 600
- Total web hits as of September 2012: 20,298,537

Results

Planttalk Colorado™ is the result of green industry partners identifying a need to provide answers to frequently asked gardener questions that are simple, consistent, and easily accessible. Although the general public can ask gardening questions of CSU Extension county agents and Colorado Master Gardener volunteers, Planttalk Colorado™ offers what neither of these information outlets can: instant access from anywhere with easy-to-use platforms. Since going live with the 24/7 automated toll-free phone service in 1998, partners have increased the number of informational bulletins that gardeners access by more than 300 percent.

Planttalk Colorado™ has stayed relevant to users over the years by keeping pace with technology, user needs, and preferences. The migration of Planttalk from the phone to the Internet took place when the older technology (toll-free telephone line) became significantly less used and less cost-effective. A need for gardening information by Spanish-speakers led to the translation of Planttalk scripts into Spanish. A specific Spanish-language marketing brochure supported this effort. Scripts remain available through the Planttalk website, RSS feeds, podcasts, and YouTube videos. The format in which Planttalk information is shared will continue to evolve with changing technologies.

These efforts have resulted in a significant use of Planttalk Colorado™ information.

- Website statistics from 2011 and 2012 show that:
 - as of September 2012, www.planttalk.org receives nearly 70,000 average hits each month. This is a 20 percent increase over the 2010 monthly average. Since the website launched, it has tallied more than 20 million hits;
 - a comparison of monthly website hits by Colorado county shows that Denver County hits surpass the total of any other county by more than 25,000;
 - monthly podcast hits from the first nine months of 2012 average 21,950, a figure that is more than twice the average monthly hits for the same timeframe in 2011 (9,694 hits);
 - Spanish Planttalk website hits currently average nearly 6,000 per month.

“Extension is very experienced in getting gardening information to outlying areas of Colorado. Extension also has a wealth of experience in providing service and information to all our community.”

– Beth Zwinak
Manager, Tagawa Gardens

“Through Planttalk Colorado™, 70,000 people each month are getting the CSU Extension name in front of them. We’re providing unbiased information that’s agreed upon by three entities that are among the best sources of information in the state. I don’t think you have anything like that anywhere else.”

– Jim Klett
CSU Extension specialist in landscape horticulture

Planttalk Colorado Partners

- Green Industries of Colorado is an alliance of eight trade associations representing all facets of the state’s horticulture and landscape industries. Planttalk Colorado™ scripts are scrutinized by those with Green Industries’ expertise in consumer-based marketing and communications.
- Denver Botanic Gardens has a strong education program that connects people with plants, many from regions similar to the Rocky Mountains and from around the world.

Contact Information

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