

Recommendations proposed for increasing arboreta membership, sustaining programs

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A new study looked at ways to sustain important programming at community gardens. Credit: Photo courtesy of Kathleen M. Kelley

Public gardens and arboreta rely on members as stable sources of funding and to fill critical volunteer needs. Maturing membership demographics coupled with flat enrollment numbers presents multiple challenges for arboreta directors and boards in attracting new members and competing for limited consumer discretionary entertainment and activity dollars. Researchers from the Department of Horticulture at Pennsylvania State University and The Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College recently conducted two studies designed to better understand arboreta and community members' attitudes toward programming and memberships benefits. The study produced recommendations that the researchers hope will contribute to more sustainable institutions.

Kathleen M. Kelley, James C. Sellmer, and Rebecca H. Robert reported on their research in *HortTechnology*.

The team sent a mail survey to arboreta members that asked what encouraged them to become members and what member services they valued. The second study, an Internet survey of consumers residing within a 30-mile radius of the arboreta, was designed to understand what strategies might increase arboreta membership. Several differences were noted between responses from the arboretum members and those from community participants.

Results from the survey of current members showed that the top three reasons people joined an arboretum's association were "the benefits offered" (28.2%), "providing the arboretum with financial support" (22.9%), and "to attend horticultural educational programs at a discounted rate" (22.6%).

Not surprisingly, interest in gardening appeared to be greater among arboreta members compared with the general community members. Arboreta members' interest in garden programming and activities differed from those of [local community respondents](#) in all categories except "outdoor concerts and live performances," "wine tasting and tours," and "painting and drawing." One activity that appeared to be more of interest to community members than arboreta members was "cooking and entertaining".

Overall, gardening, landscaping, and lawn care programming appeared to garner the most interest from arboreta members, with 92.7% rating their interest in this category as "somewhat interested" to "very interested." Related to the delivery of programs, responses showed that hands-on workshops would appeal to arboreta members, particularly women and those with a higher level of education.

According to Kelley, corresponding author of the study, the survey responses should offer arboreta staff helpful information upon which to base programming decisions. "It is hoped that by providing appealing programs, activities, and events along with advertising arboreta membership benefits—such as reduced rates and special members' only events—membership will indeed grow."

More information: [horttech.ashspublications.org/ ...
nt/abstract/20/5/902](https://horttech.ashspublications.org/...nt/abstract/20/5/902)

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