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November 7, 2003

Final Report: Pesticide Risk Reduction through Point-of-Purchase IPM Education

(period: April 1, 2001 to October 30, 2003)

Since the inception of this program the Home Horticulture/Consumer IPM Educators have been working on five major areas addressed by these grants. These areas include conducting a consumer IPM educational series, conducting green industry IPM training, preparing and distributing Point of Purchase IPM fact sheets for consumers, Creating demonstration gardens, and, Developing the FAQ (frequently asked questions) reference series for the consumer garden “hotlines.”

Point of Purchase (POP) IPM fact sheets

Since the beginning of the program over 18,000 of the POP IPM “fact sheets” have been distributed. The vast majority of these went directly into consumer hands via the displays in the seven cooperating retail outlets. Second to the retailers was the use by Musselman Greenhouses in Cashtown, PA. Musselman’s bundled factsheets with deliveries to retailers. They shipped 3,775 of the Poinsettia Care fact sheets to three states (PA, MD & VA) for the 2002 holiday season. Attached is a sampling of the distribution for the period 9/1/02 through 8/31/03. There are now 20 fact sheets in the POP IPM series. A sample of the current order form is attached.

Due to the time limitations of the program and limited travel budget, distribution of the retail displays was kept to Franklin County, PA and the surrounding region. As the program has picked up steam, this got to be more challenging as large numbers of retailers throughout the region have requested this information service. After many prototypes, we settled on a rural mailbox display that could be readily moved via a handtruck. See the attached digital image of the retail display in a Chambersburg Lowe’s Store.

One of the earliest concerns was our ability to get this information into the “big box retailers.” This same concern was voiced to us by several educators nationwide as possible impediments to reaching large numbers of consumers. While there is no simple method to get a display into these large retailers, there are some lessons that seem to be universal in working with them:

-All displays must be self serve. The less their staff needs to interact with the customer on information, the better.

-All displays must be vendor serviced. They simply will not commit staff time to cleaning and filling displays. Both Lowe’s and Wal-Mart have systems in place for vendor servicing.

- Displays must use a minimal footprint in a sales area. Retailers evaluate their stores in a number of areas, one is dollars turned per square foot. They are not interested in large displays.
- Deal with the local and regional manager. There is little to be gained in dealing with a department manager.
- Stress the connection to in our case Penn State University. Stores understand branding and enjoy their association with major brands such as PSU. Signage on the retail display clearly indicates the PSU source of the information.

This entire part of the project started with a single inquiry from a Chambersburg, PA retailer (Snaveley's Garden Center). The owner, Chris Snaveley came to the Franklin County Cooperative Extension office seeking printed information he could supply to his landscape and retail clients to improve their plant care and reduce his warranty losses. After reviewing a solid sampling of the materials available through Penn State University and the Land Grant system, Mr. Snaveley determined that none of the then current materials were of any use. Specifically, he felt that they were all "over the heads of his clientele" and were written by University specialists to other specialists vs. to a consumer audience. A survey of local retailers by Lana Adams, our first educator on this project confirmed that Mr. Snaveley's opinion was well shared in the industry and that there was a need for properly written consumer support materials. Further research revealed that targeting our materials at the 6-8th grade comprehension level and keeping them to one page (2 sides) using minimal scientific jargon was what was required to fill the information void. This initial survey of the retailers also generated the list of factsheet topics we have developed since.

Several other agencies dealing in IPM and nutrient management issues for consumers have adapted some selected fact sheets from the series for their own use. Our only requirement for this use was a request that they indicate the source of the materials.

Demonstration Gardens

The former Franklin County Vegetable Gardens and Gardeners Select Garden has been converted into the Franklin Horticulture Education Center (FHEC). As part of this conversion, paved pathways wide enough to accommodate disabled persons were installed along with drip irrigation. Since the growing season of 2001, the FHEC has hosted an annual tomato trial and tasting for consumer gardeners. The annual tomato tasting event has hosted over 300 consumer gardeners along with attracting local political and news media interest. Participants get to sample the 20+ tomato varieties grown in the trial while the consumer educator along with Master Gardener volunteers provide information on growing a wide range of vegetable crops using minimal pesticides.

The tomato trial along with the educational effort will continue under the Master Gardener program for the foreseeable future. Other related projects such as a row cover for insect control demonstration are in the planning stages as additional FHEC programs.

Consumer IPM Educational Series

In March 2002, Fall 2002 & Spring 2003 we conducted four class (one per week) educational series for homeowners and beginning gardeners. We addressed the following topics: vegetable gardening, proper fertilization of gardens and lawns, gardening for butterflies, least toxic methods of pest control, beneficial insects, proper pruning and mowing techniques, and more environmentally 'friendly' lawn care. Participants in these classes completed evaluations, in which they reported that as a result of the classes they were very likely to practice IPM in their home landscapes. Participants also reported that as a result of this program, they had a better understanding of proper lawn care and fertilizer use.

Green Industry IPM Training

No specific trainings were able to get "off the ground" in this area. The Penn State Capital Region Horticulture Team has embraced the concept of these trainings and is actively studying how best to carry out these trainings. Most green industry practitioners already attend one or more winter conferences and are loath to attend a specific conference or meeting on getting an IPM message to consumers. Many garden centers and related retailers have reported that they use the POP IPM series as training materials and references for new staff.

Training garden center staff will be the likely focus of any future training's as this has been identified as a specific need by garden center owner / operators. There are a number of challenges in developing a program to train the staff of garden centers:

- 1) High industry turnover means we are required to train the staff at each retailer annually with the same message vs. upgrading their training. This also burdens the retailer as they must keep supporting the same training in employee time, travel, and perhaps conference fees.
- 2) Need to train all of the staff for every retailer in a very small window as the retailers try to bring their staff on board as close to the spring rush as possible.
- 3) Most of the garden center operators want to host the trainings so they do not need to send staff elsewhere. Few so far are willing to send staff off premises. One way around this may be to build the trainings around increasing sales of plants and low environmental impact products versus simply training their staff in IPM practices that consumer can use. Operators have indicated that improving "salesmanship" with an IPM angle could be a conference worth sending staff to attend.

Consumer FAQ's (Frequently Asked Questions)

Chris Mayer, second half program educator, led an effort to review the Master Gardener walk-in and phone-in consumer log books of the last four years. Out of this came the prioritized list of issues that concerned consumers most as relate to garden and home pest and plant management. Chris and her team have developed the FAQ list into resource / reference books on Vegetables, Turf, General Cultural Garden Questions, and Household Pests. These are heavily cross indexed in a separate reference so even the most inexperienced user can locate the information they are seeking. Once the FAQ references on Small Fruit, Tree Fruit, Woody Ornamentals, Herbaceous Ornamentals, Bulbs, and Animal /Birds are completed the entire reference will be placed on a CD using the cross referencing index to search for needed information.

Although funding has run out, Chris Mayer is keeping her team together and is anticipating continuing this as a volunteer effort. The initial phase of creating the FAQ reference is approximately 70% completed.

Current Status of the Program:

The Franklin Cooperative Extension Office in Chambersburg, PA will continue to print and distribute the current POP IPM series to consumers and retailers. Master Gardeners working out of the Franklin office will continue to support the mailbox displays for the foreseeable future by replacing printed material as the seasons change and cleaning the displays. The Franklin office will continue to keep the publications in print and on the regional website. All of the current series has been sent to Texas A & M University (TAMU) under a request for translation to Spanish as there are no consumer gardening publications for Spanish speakers in print today.

During the course of the project several failed efforts at obtaining additional funding to continue the program were mounted. As of this writing, there seems to be limited opportunities for grant funding this type of program. If TAMU agrees to translate the fact sheet series into Spanish, we will be able to seek funding within CREES and other sources targeted at adapting program materials for minorities.

Final Comments:

This program has clearly demonstrated both the need and desire on the part of consumers and retailers for IPM materials prepared at the level they need. While this program was able to develop the printed program materials and distribute them locally, the demand for such a program throughout the Mid-Atlantic is enormous. Both the program educator and Principal Investigator received numerous requests for printed materials and to a lesser extent the rural mailbox display. Due to the limited budget and timeline, these requests were handled through mailing of printed materials and referrals to the PSU IPM website.

Arguably the greatest breakthrough in this program was in getting the rural mailbox display into the Chambersburg, PA Lowe's and Wal-Mart stores and the chance to reach their large clientele. It became obvious in those negotiations that the local store managers and to a lesser extent district management have some working room in making such an arrangement.

In order to reach a greater audience with this type of program, a substantially larger and regionally-based program is necessary. The need to sell the printed material display to each retailer then maintain the display with seasonally adjusted materials as well as support educational programs in consumer IPM issues will require a level of organization and support well above the level of this program. Locally, in Adams, Cumberland, Franklin, and York Counties, this program reached a large number of consumers. The Real challenge is in using the lessons from this program to reach the remainder of the Mid-Atlantic gardening audience with the IPM message.

This report was submitted by Steve Bogash, Regional Horticulture Educator