

2020 Garden Tour Overview

Planning

It had been five years since the last Master Gardener garden tour and President Virginia Scofield asked Susan Varlamoff if she was interested in organizing a garden tour for 2020. She agreed and approached Linda Bolton to co-chair the effort and Linda consented. They held their first meeting in July 2019 to begin planning. Susan and Linda decided on these guiding principles:

- to maintain a small planning committee since both have considerable experience organizing large events and know that managing large committees can be unwieldy,
- to make this event as professional as possible with the resources available,
- to confine the tour to South Gwinnett County to avoid long distance travel throughout Gwinnett County and congestion on roads on Saturday,
- to include seven gardens with diverse landscapes, ranging from a traditional English garden to a free-flowing native plant garden,
- To add an educational component by providing metal markers to garden hosts for the purpose of identifying plants, thus meeting one of the missions of GCMGA
- To recruit sponsors for the tour to defray expenses and to show a profit.

The date was set for Saturday May 30, 4 weeks following the plant sale to be able recruit Master Gardeners who wanted to volunteer at both events. Ideally the co-chairs opted for mid-April when more flowers and shrubs would be in bloom but since the plant sale is fixed at the third Saturday in April, they agreed to late May. The tour time was decided to be 9 am – 4 pm to allow for garden visits in consideration of the warm weather.

The planning continued throughout the remainder of 2019 with others agreeing to serve on the committees to recruit and manage docents and handle the tickets. Save the Date cards were printed and distributed at the Nov. Master Gardener meeting.

The design of the tickets was handled by a firm in India. Ivan Varlamoff who has expertise in marketing and brochure development managed this work. The brochure/ticket was modeled on an example from the Atlanta Botanical Gardens.

In January, a coronavirus outbreak which began in China and spread to Europe came to the US. constituting a global pandemic. The United States shut down during April and May. Covid-19 was found to be particularly lethal to those 60 years of age and older. Many Master Gardeners fall in this category. Georgia Governor, Kemp issued a Stay-at-Home order for the elderly until May 30 and then extended it until June 12. Co-chairs Susan and Linda canceled the May 30th tour.

The garden tour co-chairs had a dilemma. Should they consider rescheduling the tour for this year or next year. They consulted CDC outbreak specialist Dr. Pierre Rollin and

asked his advice. He said an outdoor event would not spread the virus if people agreed to social distance and wear masks. Dr. Rollin said the coronavirus is killed in sunlight and the fresh air dissipates it. After polling the garden hosts and receiving strong support to hold the tour this year, Linda and Susan decided to move forward with the tour and set the date for June 13, a day after the stay-at-home order was lifted.

Organizing a garden tour during a pandemic provided many challenges including the inability to recruit docents and sell tickets at the Master Gardener meetings that were canceled. It was not possible to meet in person with the garden tour committee, garden hosts and docents. Hosting a brunch for the volunteers was out of the question. The planning committee met by Zoom sessions to avoid in person contact. This also presented many marketing dilemmas just as the marketing campaign was taking off, we had to rethink everything. In addition, measures had to be taken to encourage garden hosts, docents, and garden visitors to social distance, wear masks and limit contact including between docents and visitors during check in. Linda Bolton, a registered nurse handled this aspect of the tour. She bought plastic boxes to hold supplies needed to manage the garden tour during a pandemic (list included in the report) and instructions. A flyer in clear plastic folder was posted at each garden registration table to emphasize social distancing.

Signs for the garden tour were repurposed from previous garden tours and the plant sale. Balloons marked the host garden and each host received an engraved rock given out during the pre-tour for garden hosts, the morning before the garden tour. A docent tour was held in the afternoon.

Tour day results

Incredibly, the weather on the day of the tour was clear and relatively cool (70° - 85° F) for this period. The turnout was spectacular. Because most garden tours had been canceled including the Atlanta Botanical Gardens Connoisseur Tour, people were ready to be in nature and gardens. Visitors came from as far as Kennesaw, Lake Oconee, Atlanta and Peachtree City to attend the Gwinnett County Master Gardener Tour. The 250 tickets sold out and on the day of the tour, the ticket sales agents issued one ticket per couple instead of per person for a total of 263 tickets sold! A full report of sales can be found in this report. Signs were collected after the tour.