



PLANNING A TOWN TAKEOVER

This past December, wholesale grower Skagit Gardens took to the local streets for a flash mob beautification project that generated community goodwill and positive brand reinforcement.

By Rhonda Jennings

What do you get when you put together a holiday plant promotion, a civic donation and a fun media event?

This past December, we at Skagit Gardens, a wholesale grower in Mount Vernon, Wash., decided to create some holiday fun and excitement in our hometown by orchestrating a flash mob planting to spruce up city planters. We called it "Flash Mob Meets Guerilla Gardening."

A flash mob is usually created by a seemingly spontaneous gathering of people in a public place that draws attention from passersby. It gathers quickly and then disperses, usually with nothing left but the record of the event — often seen on YouTube. We thought it would be fun to use the flash mob idea to bring marketing attention to Helleborus Jacob, a blooming plant we were heavily promoting for holiday sales.

As far as we knew, a horde of guerilla gardeners planting outdoor containers as a flash mob event hadn't been done before. If we were to make it all happen with the best results for everyone involved, we had six business days to organize, implement and advertise the event.

Could we pull it together in such a short time?

The Plan

First came the plan. Earlier in November, we had planted a couple of containers in the downtown area. The response from the Downtown Merchants Association had been positive, so it wasn't a great leap to

think about doing all the containers, all 58 of them, as a community beautification project.

These large pots, which line both sides of the main street for about six blocks, had last been planted with seasonal color in the fall, and by December were looking a bit tired. Like many municipalities across the country, our city was not long on funds to buy fresh plants for the planters, but the holiday shopping season was an important one for the downtown merchants and they would benefit from any kind of decorating on the streets.

The single most important element was organization and we were blessed with an employee who had professional organizing experience. Her methods, however, were simple.

In order to plant 58 containers in about an hour's time, we needed 30 to 35 people. For the actual planting, we gathered a group of employees, downtown merchants and master gardeners, including a local celebrity, Graham Kerr, a well-known chef and community gardening advocate.

Our people were split into groups with a Skagit Gardens employee as group leader. The planters were divided into zones with a group leader responsible for each one, and mapped out on a printed schematic. In addition to the Hellebores, companion plants were chosen that were colorful, evergreen and hardy enough to look attractive all winter in a container.

At the nursery, they were arranged in numbered flats, so each team knew which was theirs as they came off the truck.

It was also important to talk to key



These were the key elements that allowed us to go from concept to implementation in six days:

- A definite plan with a clear idea of what we wanted to accomplish
- Organization: the shorter the timescale of the event, the more detailed this needed to be
- Communication with important people: officials, anyone directly affected and any others who might be interested
- Participants with enthusiasm to make it happen, whether employees or volunteers
- A follow-up plan to take full press advantage of the event, using traditional and social media

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PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES



To plant 58 containers in one hour, Skagit Gardens employees, downtown merchants and master gardeners, including local celebrity Graham Kerr, a well-known chef and community gardening advocate, worked together to spruce up the local downtown area.

people: the city, of course, which owned the planters, and the Downtown Merchants Association, as well as a few of the individual business owners. We asked for appropriate permissions, including checking on parking issues.

In order to benefit from the public's awareness of the event, we approached the city's Chamber of Commerce and used a list of its contacts, as well as a list of our own, to send out a "sneak peek" notice of when the event was going to take place and included the local media (newspapers and radio stations) and the mayor's office.

The city offered the services of two people and a truck to help with plant transport and cleanup.

Finally, our plan was to photograph and videotape the event as it was happening. In order to take PR advantage of the event, we would put the photos and videos on our YouTube and Facebook pages and websites, and send a press release to those in the industry.

The Execution

On the day of the event, Dec. 12, 2012, at 11 a.m., 35 people descended on the city street with plants in hand, dressed up in holiday hats and singing carols. Within an hour the planters were looking beautiful again, and merchants and shoppers were delighted with the results.

Did it come out perfectly with just six business days' worth of planning? Of course not. There were minor hitches here and there. We were not mobbed by a sea of people coming to see the event. The national press services didn't pick up our story. If we had more time to notify the "right" media person or had the luck to plan our event during a news lull, we might have garnered more interest from our local news stations. Our singing wasn't as robust as it could have been.

But we did create a lot of interest in what we were doing and had the satisfaction of helping to beautify a small part of our community. Our mayor walked the street thanking each participant.

One downtown merchant had this to say: "Morale downtown was getting pretty low. You swooped in and gave us back joy for the holidays and the new year."

The story was told in our local papers and in industry publications. And finally, a perennial we would like to sell more of was planted in a public location where people pass by everyday and can see its beauty. **LGR**

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