

Suspense to Sampling

Mesquite Valley Growers' Most Popular Events

By Pete Mihalek

In last month's feature "Tucson's Finest" on page 14, we showed you a snapshot of two highly anticipated and well-attended events at Mesquite Valley Growers — Run for the Roses and Citrus Tasting.

In this month's edition of Let Me Explain..., we were able to reconnect with Cathy Bishop, Mesquite Valley Growers' general manager, to learn a little more about the appeal these events have with her customer base.

Roses by Many Other Names

Mesquite Valley's annual Run for the Roses event just wrapped up its 19th rendition this spring and is still running as strong as ever.

As Bishop explains it, this rose-centric event began when she was simply trying to make an advertising campaign that would be slightly exciting.

"We grow 6,000 to 10,000 roses each year in more than 300 varieties, and because of their proximity to the sales area, they attracted a lot of attention," she says. Four of Mesquite Valley Growers' 24 acres are dedicated to retail sales. Immediately behind that section is where its bedding plants are grown and its roses are on display, so to speak. "We're not hiding them," she adds. "We put chains around the area and act like it's a special event every time a customer wants to walk in the rose field. It's amazing how you can change your customer's perception of something by the way you present it to them."

She compares it to fine wine. "My other half, Tom, is a grower that will sell no wine before its time," she says. "We wanted people to think of our roses in the same context. We never want to sell our roses before they're ready. And rather than make people mad that they couldn't have

them until they were 'ready,' we made an event of it."

Mesquite Valley uses radio and magazine advertising leading up to this spring event, which is held on the first Saturday of April. The ads invite people out to sniff, scout, take notes and decide on what roses they will plan to take home. On the day of the "rose party," everyone is invited. Food, drinks and various rose specialists are on hand to provide a comfortable and confidence-building shopping experience.

"By not selling them so early, we raise the desire level and usually sell 10 percent of the crop the first weekend," she says. "And thanks to breeders, there are new rose varieties every year to build up excitement around."

Pucker Up

Another popular to-do at Mesquite Valley is the Citrus Tasting, which comes a little earlier on the calendar and is now in its sixth year.

This tasting came about when Bishop recognized the lack of citrus variety found in most grocery stores.

"Most of the time when you go to the grocery store, there are two or three varieties of oranges, if you're lucky, and maybe two kinds of grapefruits," Bishop says. "The kinds of citrus everyone is familiar with are the boring ones."

This sharply contrasts the 80 or so citrus

varieties Mesquite Valley grows and sells. So how does one know what they want until they try it?

"They don't," she says. "So we slice and dice and juice and hand out information and talk citrus."

Huge selection aside, the citrus tasting format grew from the many isolated occurrences of customers wanting to try a fruit.

"We'd pick one off the tree and slice it open and say, 'Here try this.' They would go, 'Oh my goodness. That's so great. I never knew it could taste like that.'"

Bishop and her team wanted to bring that experience to more of her customers, and a citrus tasting event was the perfect solution.

"We decided on a date that was the best cross section of various citrus types being ripe," she says.

The official citrus tasting event is held two weekends in a row — the last weekend in February and the first weekend in March.

"We have a big spread and everything is labeled so people can try them," she says.

Of the 80 varieties available, Bishop says many of her customers initially look at most of them as if they are a part of some gourmet club, "but in reality they're just as easy to grow as any other kind of citrus and we emphasize that." **LGR**

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