



A CALL TO ACTION

AIB isn't just a contest, it's a movement to protect and enhance the environment that every citizen, business and government shares and enjoys. And you can help it gain momentum.

By Stan Pohmer

I'm writing this column as I sit in a hotel room in Washington, D.C., attending the 1st Annual America in Bloom (AIB) Symposium. In addition to the excellent educational seminars, this is a celebration for all of the communities that participated in the friendly competition focused on beautification and civic involvement, but more on that later.

First, a little background on AIB. It's modeled after successful programs that have been in place for many years in Europe, the Pacific Rim and Canada; in fact, our northern neighbors, whose "Communities in Bloom" program has been a resounding success, have been instrumental in helping our U.S. program get up and running.

AIB is the result of a group of industry visionaries (myself included) who saw the potential of increasing public awareness about the importance that our industry's products and programs play in the lives of people and the opportunity to increase their participation with them. And, selfishly, by

increasing their participation with the products we provide, we can build consumption — and increased consumption results in increased sales.

The AIB mission is lofty and far-reaching, "dedicated to promoting nationwide beautification programs and both personal and community involvement through the use of flowers, plants, trees and other environmental and lifestyle enhancements, and to providing the educational programs and resources toward that end." AIB is a grass-roots program that rallies municipal involvement through the support of the populace, a classic public/private partnership, that creates civic pride while improving living spaces, benefiting the entire community. Yes, the intent is to make the AIB program a nationwide initiative, but it's being realized one community at a time. What AIB provides is the structure and tools that a community can use, but it's the creativity, commitment and execution of these communities and their realization of the positive impact that environmental horticulture can make that makes the program a success.

MORE THAN A CONTEST

The friendly competition or contest between communities of similar population size is the most visible element of the AIB program and the one that has received the most industry exposure, but AIB is much more than just a contest. At its core, it's a movement to protect and enhance the environment every citizen, business and government shares and enjoys. The program raises the awareness of the tangible and intangible benefits that plants, flowers and environmental horticulture provide, improving our lifestyle and demonstrating financial payback through improved home valuation and busi-

ness conditions and, in some cases, improved tourism revenues. And, because the program is based on total community involvement, it brings all parties — scout troops and 4Hers, garden groups and businesses, civic, school and government leaders — together, planning and working to generate increased civic pride in their communities.

The "contest" element of the AIB program is not just competitive; it's a continual learning process. Teams of professional volunteer judges visit each participating community and rate them in eight areas: community involvement, floral displays, landscapes, trees, turf and open spaces, tidiness, heritage and environmental awareness. But as they competitively critique the communities, they are also sharing new ways to improve, educating them on some of the things they've seen in other communities — a "best practices" program in action.

At the Symposium, representatives (made up of private citizens, business owners and city governments) from the municipalities that participated in this inaugural contest came together to share their experiences and learn from each other. Listening to them relate their individual stories, I couldn't help but be impressed with the fact that this program acted as a catalyst for bringing their communities together, working towards a common goal, resulting in a civic pride that some said was unachievable without this program as the impetus. And the size of the community didn't have any bearing on the results they were able to achieve — small towns with populations of 2,000 people participated right alongside cities like Chicago and entire counties such as Monroe, N.Y., and Kalamazoo, Mich. All had positive stories to relate (find out more about the winners on page 88).

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But as I said before, the contest is just one of the AIB program elements; every community, village, town, city or county can realize the same benefits — civic involvement and pride, raised awareness and enhancement of their environments, beautification and enjoyment of mother nature — as the municipalities that felt ready to take their program to the competitive level. Involvement in the AIB strategies and mission is a process, not something that is ever finished. They can start small, maybe just focusing on a single project, and as they begin to see the positive impact it has on their community, they can start adding to it, taking it to the next level.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

We're working with the National League of Cities and the national parks and recreation groups to get our message out, providing the Garden Writers Association with information on the benefits that community gardening and

environmental horticulture can have in their towns and cities. But the strength and success of our program truly lies in getting the message out to the community — the home and business owners in each populace — the grassroots of any successful movement. Because it's bottom-up involvement without a lot of bureaucracy, not top-down. And this is where you come in. No one has more credibility and opportunity to build this groundswell of support than those actively involved in our industry — the L&G retailers, growers and manufacturers, the same people who stand to receive direct financial benefit from the program's success.

Here are some things you can do to help support the AIB movement:

- Learn more by visiting our Web site, www.americainbloom.org, for more information on what AIB is all about;
- be the catalyst for starting the grassroots support of the initiatives that AIB is promoting in your own market and community;
- share your expertise and experience with your community;
- become an AIB apostle, preaching the benefits of our efforts and raising the awareness of the benefits of environmental horticulture to others in our industry; and
- consider becoming a financial supporter of AIB so we can do more to educate, spread our message and develop more materials and programs.

It's not often that we have the opportunity to derive direct benefit from doing the right thing for the right reason. America in Bloom merits your support — it really is all about doing the right thing for the right reason — for our communities, our industry and your customers! 🌸

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