

The Pollinator

'Small but Mighty'



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A project that changed a chapter



Vancouver Island Master Gardener Jo-Ann Canning spearheaded an online gardening seminar series that has reached gardeners around the world. Last year over 1,700 viewers logged on.

By Anne Patterson

An online gardening seminar series, produced by the Vancouver Island Master Gardeners Association (VIMGA) in partnership with the Vancouver Island Regional Library (VIRL) has taken public outreach to a new level.

Spearheaded by 30-year veteran MG Jo-Ann Canning, the seminar series began in 2021 when the Vancouver Island Regional Library approached VIMGA to give an in-person monthly gardening seminar as part of the ongoing adult education project. Jo, a seasoned speaker, took on the task.

According to Jo, the first few in-person seminars drew audiences of between eight and a dozen people. Then COVID stuck. The library got a Zoom licence so the seminars could continue online. During the first Zoom lecture, 75 people signed on and it crashed the system. Quick thinking by the tech team expanded the licence mid-lecture and the MGs were able to finish their first event: "Since then, we have grown and evolved."

"Last year alone, the total number of zoom attendees and YouTube views for the 10 new seminars was 1,717. And the number of views keeps rising as people discover the recorded videos. The outreach per MG is amazing. We've had people attend from New Zealand, the UK, and six US states. It has been a roaring success," said Jo.

How it works

Anyone - library member or not - can register for a free seminar by logging on to either the Vancouver Island Library (<https://virl.bc.ca/learn/skills/gardening/virtual-gardening/>) or the VIMGA (www.vimga.org) website which take users to Eventbrite software where they reserve a spot. Reminders and a link are emailed a week, a day, then an hour in advance.

Each session is 1.5 hours. At the end, the speaker answers questions relating to the content that attendees have written into the Q&A function. Related questions are also answered during the seminar by two MG panelists who monitor the chat. Within a couple of days, the Zoom video is posted permanently on the library's website for all to view at any later date.

For patrons in more remote areas, a community centre, a local library or a mobile library truck with WIFI capability can reach people who might not otherwise have access to the seminars or the recordings.

"The electronic platform expands our ability to teach science-based gardening to a huge audience. And having a Master Gardener onsite during these events can give a personal touch that I feel cannot be duplicated."

Speaking of speakers

As a published author and experienced speaker, Jo-Ann is accustomed to creating PowerPoint presentations and always uses slides in her virtual presentations as well as including a list of books and website links. That way, she added, viewers can print or screen shoot the slides to have the information to refer to later.

"One thing I would say is that it is a lot of work. There were a few times when I was really burning out. More senior MGs also volunteered to ensure that the public enjoys a variety of subjects presented by experts in their particular fields of interest. Seminar topics include everything from weed control and garden design to exotic orchid growing."

Local information for where?

Since the 1960s, Jo-Ann has gardened in diverse climates, among them the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island, Nova Scotia, the American Southwest, the USA's Rocky Mountains, and the UK. Answering questions from seminar participants from different regions and different countries gives a whole new meaning to 'local'. In order to deal with audiences from different climates she makes a point of asking attendees where they are from.

“You have to be careful when you speak to people from different regions. This is especially important when it comes to subjects like frost dates or invasives. You can’t recommend a plant from your region that is invasive or tender in another area.

Panel members monitoring the chat are also careful to match the advice to a participant’s local climate concerns. Some do nothing but provide links on the chats. For instance, if an attendee asks where to get worm castings in a particular municipality, a panelist will look it up and send a link.

A successful marketing campaign

Vancouver Island Regional Library staff bring two important assets to the partnership with VIMGA: the marketing budget of a large, established agency, and an extensive network of library goers. There are approximately 38 branches of the VIRL and they are digitally connected. When an event is scheduled at one branch, it is promoted by all branches and on VIRL web pages. Event posters are displayed in each branch. Bookmarks promoting the sessions are handed out to library patrons.

Searching ‘virtual gardening’ on the VIRL site calls up all the historical sessions as well as the current ones. Two librarians, also gardeners, started a seed bank. When library users come in, they can take an envelope packed with a few seeds with identified with the name of the flowers or vegetables they came from.

“It keeps the gardening alive, and serves people in that part of the gardening world who may only need a few seeds or who are a little thin on cash,” said Jo.

A boost for the chapter

Participation in the virtual gardening series has had a profound and positive effect on the Vancouver Island chapter members. They have reached and surpassed all their volunteer expectations. “Since the seminars began in 2021, we’ve increased our outreach tenfold. Our chapter has also grown. We haven’t had to recruit new (members).”

The virtual gardening seminars series has not only elevated the chapter’s public profile, it offers members different ways to participate. It gives MGs and MGITs an opportunity to get volunteer hours by researching and discussing a topic in depth. It is also provides options for those who aren’t comfortable in a public clinic setting where they have to jump from one topic to the next, or who find public speaking unappealing. They can stay in the background and answer questions in the chat room instead.

“At the AGM, when we report all the data on the seminars and we see how many people we’ve reached, it’s motivating for the chapter’s members.” Jo added.

VIMGA allocates hours for participation in the seminars this way:

- 4 hours prep time per 1 hour presentation time;
- Up to 2 hours for research per 1 hour of presentation time;
- 1 hour for each hour of presentation time, or for assisting as a panelist or in the chat room.

Trendspotting: what’s hot, what’s not

In addition to monitoring attendance at seminars, participants are asked to complete an optional brief questionnaire afterwards. This helps VIMGA identify trends and emerging areas of interest in the gardening world.

“Take the strata reality, for example. Thirty years ago, when I became an MG, there was almost nothing about small space gardening. Now, with all the baby boomers retiring, the thirst for knowledge about patio gardening has exploded. You can go to the VIRL website’s seminar list and

look up all the things relating to small space gardening. We have seminars on container gardening, balcony herb gardens, and small space composting. There is even one on sprouts and microgreens.”

Here are the YouTube/Zoom statistics for the 2025 VIMGA virtual seminars by topic

February	Unusual vegetables	375
March	Raised beds	417
April	Summer bulbs	164
May	Beneficial insects	89
June	Annual borders and Hanging baskets	93
July	Ground covers and Prostrate shrubs	88
August	Greenhouse gardening	164
September	Rain gardens	103
October	Managing fruit trees	129
November	Soil health	95
	TOTAL VIEWS	1,717

Although remaining as a seminar presenter and panelist, after 4 years, Jo handed the reigns over to a new project co-ordinator.

“It was time for a fresh viewpoint and some new ideas. Richard, our new leader, is more tech-savvy, more comfortable on social media, and appeals more to our newer MGs. We are attracting a younger demographic now, and he has taken the virtual gardening series so much farther than I could.”

Staff members from the Vancouver Island Regional Library have offered to consult with the Thompson-Nicola Regional Library staff if TSMG is interested in exploring a similar project.

Jo has also offered to help.