

The Garden Tour Phenomena

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As a 4-H Garden Program organizer, Master Gardener coordinator, and a vegetable grower, I've come to several realizations about garden tours. The first one is that everybody loves to see someone else's garden. It is education at its best. We find ourselves so distracted by the gardens themselves that we forget we are learning about varieties, design, and things like watering and spacing techniques.

The second thing I've noticed about garden tours is that while everyone would like to attend one, no one really wants to host one. People's eyes light up at the mention of the word, and in the same way that good food conjures up memories of *other* good food, they bring up golden memories of fantastic tours from the past. But when you continue with, "So, I am trying to put one together," these same people avert their eyes and shrink away to near invisibility.

I understand that it is not anti-social or apathetic tendencies that cause people to shy away from hosting a tour. Rather it is the pressure, the pedestal, and the reality that lots of people will be visiting your garden. And these visitors, regardless of their best intentions, may somewhere in the garden shed of their brains be categorizing the type of gardener you are. Are you dedicated and diligent, are you haphazard and lucky, are you haphazard and *unlucky*? In order to receive their due diagnosis, potential hosts envision all the work they will need to do to get their plots in tip-top shape and make quick mental lists of all their unfinished projects. They do this in the split second between wanting to attend the garden tour and realizing that you are actually asking them to *be* the garden tour. And because they are human, and because it is summer, and because they have to eat, and sleep, and probably work most days, they realize they are too busy to grow the garden they would want others to see. And so they avert their eyes and pray for sudden invisibility.

Of course we only want to show our best sides and our immaculate gardens. But these "best sides" are not always where the most valuable information is found. Often it is someone else's mistakes, and not bullets on a PowerPoint, that help you avoid making the same mistakes yourself. Tricks, tips, and pointers from imperfect and busy gardeners are often the most helpful to other imperfect and busy gardeners.

In this age of high-gloss, 3-D, and picture perfect, I urge you to embrace the realities of gardening—the weeds, the spacing decisions, and the sometimes scrawny pepper plants. Envision the garden of your dreams, love the one in your back yard, and consider sharing your very real masterpiece with others. To inquire about how you might become part of a garden tour event, or to find out more information about other Extension programs, please call the office at 603-787-6944.