

## MCTMN Plant Sale: Lessons Learned

After each year's sale, we request input from volunteers on how the sale could be made better and update our "Lessons Learned" document so we will not make the same mistakes again. **Volunteers: Please read this entire history to watch out for problems and keep an eye out for how we can improve the sale next year.**

### Sale Days Lessons Learned

- Develop role definition for Plant Sale Coordinator. The coordinator needs to focus on management of the sale: minute-to-minute assessment of needs, strategizing, inventory, and delegation of tasks to other volunteers.

### Sale Area

- We can get 10 old tables from AgriLife—we can figure out a way to use all. Clean them up well before we take them back to keep the privilege in place
- Stage empty boxes away from entry doors and as out of sight as possible –requested by Chamber of Commerce officials.
- Keep a waterproof box available for plant sale supplies/handouts
- Have paperweights (rocks?) to hold down stacks of handouts
- Do not place handout stand under an open space in the porch roof!
- Continue to stage cashier table and holding area to the right of the school entrance doors as you face the building (rather than the other end) to provide an expanded area for plants as well as allow customers better access to the entry doors.
- Have light tarps, vinyl tablecloths, or plastic shower curtains handy to drape over cashier tables and handout stand for hard downpours.
- We need to have it set ahead of time our procedure/who we need to talk to in order to get into the building each morning.
- Designate a volunteer to guard the door while we are moving plants and equipment in and out on days 2 and 3.
- The plant sale area and holding area should be kept tidy, and volunteers should keep personal items to a minimum.
- MUST NOT block the entrance to the vendor area.
- Use cones/flagging tape to define holding area.
- With more space in the holding area since the doors were moved, we can have 2 or 3 chairs near the holding area for customers who need to get out of the sun.
- Need 1 table in the holding area for orders w/1-2 small plants, and for plant reference books.

### Signs

- Place signs on walls throughout the plant sale area stating that we take cash, checks or credit cards and will hold plants until 5:30 for buyers.
- Need to devise a way to put up our educational selling-point signs without attaching them to windows, which won't work if window are clean or covered with condensation. Maybe buy some holders and stick them in plants or in the ground here and there, or attach to tables with strong tape.

- May want to invest in better holders for laminated plant signs that go in pots
- Sign encouraging people to buy early and let us hold, because they may not find the plant they wish when they return. Make sure the info is on pricing signs
- Put up signs about the plant sale and location on doors leading to the middle school and around the high school for people who don't enter through the main vendor area.

### **Workers**

- Some lessons learned have been incorporated into the "How to Volunteer at a Plant Sale"
- We need more people trained and practiced on the "Square" app for selling by credit cards.
- Cashier Assistant should write a receipt for ANY transaction—cash, check, or credit—every sale.
- Remind volunteers a week/2 weeks before the sale that they have volunteered, and the time they signed up for – ask that they let you know if they cannot be there. Call any who do not respond.
- Volunteers should take regular breaks in the air-conditioned building, and keep hydrated.

### **Special/Pre-Ordering**

- The special-order list that goes out to local Texas Master Naturalist chapters and NPSOT before the sale should not have wholesale prices on it
- Special-order list should include the information that we do not special-order any number fewer than a whole flat of 4-inch plants.

### **Handouts**

- Plant Information Handout – should contain all plants available at the sale
  - ~ Research copy prices to keep costs to a minimum—take dummy printout so they know exactly what we need. Consider legal size to reduce number of pages. Office Depot is likely to have best price. To save an extra visit, use on-line ordering, upload PDF of handout 2-3 days out, and collect copies the day before the sale.
  - ~ Order number of plant list handouts based on number needed the prior year. Less than 500 used in 2016.
  - ~ Put some plant-sale handouts in the presenter break room or ask that the handout be emailed to presenters
- Get new Invasives and Plant Smart handouts from Wildflower Center
- Have information/ cards recommending native-plant nurseries (Gill's, Heep's?)
- Native American Seed catalogs go very well – the company will send them free

### **Dealing with Plant Suppliers**

#### ***Native Texas Nursery***

- Do the preliminary NTN order as close to the sale as possible. Need time for preorder, but later gives us a more realistic idea of what plants will be available and blooming.
- Make sure correct delivery date is on NTN invoice and all last minute orders over the phone have been added. NTN has in the past failed to deliver plants we added to our

initial order at the last minute. Make the last-minute additions by phone on Thursday before delivery on Tuesday and request an updated invoice by email.

- When ordering NTN plants sight-unseen, ask if they are blooming. Plants that are not blooming are hard to sell (a good reason for traveling to NTN shortly before the sale)
- Re NTN order: request blooming/not shorn plants (pink gaura one year had just been pruned and didn't sell well. We have the right to refuse any plants, but we should know ahead of time.)
- Request that NTN be sure pots have labels— each year many 4-in pots do not.
- Reason for the Tuesday NTN delivery date: NTN does not work on weekends, so make sure plants will not sit on a truck all weekend before delivery.
- NTN's Beautyberry and Mexican Buckeye don't look like ours and they sell a central TX Elbowbush. Propagate these plants instead of ordering from NTN.
- Improve the offloading of the NTN order:
  - ~ 2-4 people to pull plants off truck, 1 to keep inventory, and 1 to direct placement
  - ~ If the entire order of a particular plant is not immediately accounted for, leave plants in driveway. We have been charged in the past for plants we did not get.
  - ~ When the order has been accounted for, move plants to the Friday or Saturday side of yard. If odd number of plants of a type, most go on the Friday side
  - ~ Leave aisles for moving among the plants to water or otherwise work

### ***Mike Heep's Nursery***

- Call ahead to be sure what plants Mike has available
- Remind him that he sells to us wholesale
- Request that he set ordered plants aside so they are ready when we come to pick up

### ***Propagated Plants***

- Lay out parameters for propagated plants to avoid conflict over unwanted ones:
  - ~ On the Approved Propagation list
  - ~ No odd-sized pots
  - ~ No plants started later than 8 weeks ahead of the sale
  - ~ Inspect plants to ensure they are being pruned/watered/fertilized so they aren't leggy
  - ~ Make sure propagators are aware plants will not be accepted if not well-grown
- Develop or update a general How-To guide for propagating.
- Six to 8 weeks before the sale, send out message to Chapter propagators asking what plants, and how many, they will be bringing. This will help with planning the handout, labels, and orders from other suppliers.

### ***Work with Plants***

- Policy on pricing small plants: If it is native and hard to find, it is worth the price.
- Plant workday at Staging Area:
  - ~ Soak flats of 4-inchers rather than top-watering. They are always root-bound
  - ~ Load Friday plants into trays for speed in loading/transporting
  - ~ Mark pots priced other than \$7 for gallons and \$3 for 4-inchers.

- Offer only top-quality plants. Recycle or hold poor plants
- Check whether HEB and Wal-Mart have hummer plants just before the sale, so if we run out at the sale, we can tell buyers where they are available
- Use mini-blinds and print only common and scientific names on adhesive labels to make pot labels for **only**:
  - ~ propagated plants
  - ~ plants that come from NTN without labels
  - ~ plants from Mike Heep's Nursery
- ~ Attach labels firmly to mini-blind stakes, and/or water judiciously, to avoid labels falling off before the sale. Research water-resistant labels.

### **Planning for Next Year**

- Refine our list of plants to offer right after the sale based on plants sold, but allow for differences in sales from year to year.
- Study NTN's mid-September availability list to plan for the following-year sale