Six Decades of Growing Gardeners and Protecting the Environment

Sarah Browning
UNL Extension Educator

For more than six decades, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension's Backyard Farmer has been helping gardeners grow healthy productive gardens and solve landscape problems. In fact, it officially is the longest running, locally produced, educational television program in broadcast history. Although the faces on the show have changed over the years, Backyard Farmer continues and is more popular than ever.

Backyard Farmer is a science-based, fact-filled and fun TV show, teaching gardeners how to manage their lawns, landscapes and gardens effectively while being good stewards of the environment. They learn integrated disease, pest and weed management techniques, and are encouraged to use best cultural practices. Good lawn management techniques are provided to viewers. Gardeners are encouraged to create diversity in their landscapes using plants which are well-adapted to the climate extremes of the Great Plains. Viewers learn to identify good insects like pollinators, how to protect them and create habitat for them. Understanding the do's and don'ts of attracting or discouraging wildlife in the garden is also a popular topic.

During the live show, gardeners call in with their questions. The show's phone panel is staffed by Extension Master Gardeners, who answer some questions and forward others to the on-air panel for real-time answers.

In recent years, gardeners have also been able to submit their questions and pictures, via email, social media and smart phones. The show receives hundreds of questions each week, too many to answer them all on the show. Current host Kim Todd says, “Viewers consistently tell the panelists (in the grocery store, at the gas station — and by more traditional means!) that they love the show and they wish the show would run year-round or extend further into the fall.”

A New Season Begins April 3

The TV program airs live on NET1 Thursday at 7 p.m. (CST) from April through September. Check your local listings for replay times on NET2 and NET3. Time Warner Cable subscribers can watch Backyard Farmer on-demand from April through September. This year, join the Backyard Farmer panelists as they kick off the 62nd season on April 3.

History of Backyard Farmer TV Show

George Round, former University of Nebraska-Director of Communications, and Jack McBride, former Nebraska Educational Television (NET) General Manager, were the creators of Backyard Farmer, which first aired in June 1953. The first panel of UNL experts consisted of host George Round, with Hal Ball, entomologist; John Wehing, plant pathologist and Wayne Whitney, horticulturist. John Furrer, weed specialist, joined the program later as a regular panelist. Hal Ball was soon followed by Bob Roselle, UNL entomologist, establishing the rotation of retiring staff with new panelists — which continues today.

Emery Nelson, Lancaster County Extension agent, was a frequent member of the Backyard Farmer panel from 1953 to 1976. He was followed on the show by Brent Hoadley (1976–1980) and Don Janssen (1985–2008), both horticulture educators from the Lancaster County office. In December 2010, Sarah Browning joined the Lancaster County Extension office and continues their tradition of excellence as part of the Backyard Farmer panel.

Backyard Farmer aired locally in Lincoln for about the first 20 years. In 1973, construction of NET’s statewide transmitter was completed, allowing the show to be broadcast statewide. The show was the first NET program aired in color that same year.

Now the Backyard Farmer panel is comprised of UNL Extension Specialists, UNL Extension Educators and UNL Landscape Services professionals.

Still Growing Strong — Now With Many Online Resources

The next generation of gardeners gets answers to their gardening questions from Backyard Farmer experts in a variety of ways, many of which are available year-round.

Backyard Farmer started a website in 1998 at http://byf.unl.edu. Resources on the website currently include:

- Backyard Farmer video segments organized by topic area
- Hort Update email newsletter providing seasonal information for gardeners and Nebraska’s green industry
- Frequently asked questions
- Monthly “to do” calendar
- Event calendar

In July 2006, a Backyard Farmer YouTube channel was created at www.youtube.com/user/bucslim. Viewers can watch the show’s video segments to get answers to specific questions, or watch the question and answer portion of episodes. Backyard Farmer’s YouTube channel gets more popular every year, and has received over two million views from July 2006 to March 2014.

Entire episode podcasts from 2009–2013 are available for iPad, iPod or similar devices through UNL, on iTunesU. A video player with these episodes is also on the Backyard Farmer website. Backyard Farmer episodes are the most frequently downloaded videos offered by UNL.

In addition, viewers can now follow Backyard Farmer on:

- Facebook – www.facebook.com/backyardfarmernebraska
- Twitter – https://twitter.com/BYFUNL
- Pinterest – www.pinterest.com/byfunl

Due to the continuing interest in horticulture issues after the show ends in September, a new way to reach viewers was developed this winter. Host Kim Todd, UNL Extension landscape horticulture specialist, and producer Brad Mills, UNL Educational Media, created Backyard Farmer: Lifestyle Gardening. Six episodes aired beginning January 2014. Each 30-minute show covered topics ranging from those familiar to regular viewers, to interesting and artistic garden ideas. See BACKYARD FARMER on page 8.