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Interview with Joe Cochran

Jenny Lawton

Joe Cochran

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Researcher's name: Jenny Lawton

Event: Interview with Joe Cochran, OSU Extension Office Knox County Agent

Place: at OSU Extension Office, Mt. Vernon

Jenny Lawton: First of all, what is a master gardener, and how do you work with them?

Joe Cochran: Ok, the master gardening program started about 20 years ago. So, what it was, as people began gardening and others began having landscapes around the house, everybody was calling to the Extension office with these problems: **A**ny plant has a bug on it@... they had questions. And they called the local extension office. And the agents were just becoming overburdened with that type of question instead of ag[riculture], so they developed the master gardener program which trains volunteers from the community. And they go through quite an extensive training class in plant biology. It's 10 weeks, one day a week -- so it's 60 hours of classroom instruction. It goes into... here's a manual, the manual they get. And it's developed into: basic botany, soils and fertilizer, entomology, plant pathology, propagation, house plants, lawns, herbaceous ornamentals, woody ornamentals, vegetables, herbs, fruits... so it's quite a class. We're currently doing one right now -- we have 13 in the class -- and we've been meeting with Wayne County. So they go through this class, and after completing it, they have to donate back to the University, Ohio State University, 50 hours of volunteer service to the community promoting horticulture, vegetable gardening, things like that.

JL: So who takes these classes?

JC: All sorts of people -- retired people, we have two girls from Kenyon -- Carol Waggoneer, Darcy Blankenhorn or something like that. Some people take off work one day a week. So we get quite a mix of people. It's really a neat program.

JL: So have most of these people gardened before.

JC: Yes. As a matter of fact, it's kind of interesting: at the beginning of the class, I asked how many years of gardening experience they had. And this class of 13 has a combined total of 488 years of gardening experience.

JL: Oh my gosh. I want to talk more about gardening in Knox County. Are people more vegetable or flower gardeners?

JC: Well, I think there are a lot of vegetable gardeners. In fact, 50 years ago, when everybody lived on a farm, they grew their own food source. So that's kind of retained the generation to generation... usually everybody helped their grandma garden, y=know. So it's kind of passed down as a generational thing. There's a lot of flower gardeners too -- everyone has a little landscaping around the house.

JL: Right now it's hard to go out and look at any of those gardens because its...

JC: Yeah, but it won't be long, y=know, another month and it'll start popping.

JL: There's a difference between hobby gardening and gardening for food -- and then there's a difference between that and farming. How does that break down?

JC: I think most gardeners are hobby gardeners. I think there are only a very few that rely totally on the garden as their food source. Yeah, I think as a hobby.

JL: So what kind of opportunities are there for gardeners in Knox County? I've found out a bit about 4-H and the master gardening course that people can take and give back to the community. What other kinds of things?

JC: There are several gardening clubs, y=know, things like that. Anyone who wants to get into the business, we now have a farmers= market, which I'm sure you're aware of, on the square -

so that helps in that way.

JL: Do you think that the tomato is Knox County's vegetable? Or, what (if anything) characterizes Knox County?

JC: Well, I think the tomato is probably everybody's vegetable - it's such a versatile food and everyone wants that fresh-ripened tomato to put on their sandwich or to use with anything.

Yeah, that's probably one of the #1 plants.

JL: I'm trying to get a sense of why people garden too. I know about canning and the food source, but what do you think the...*je ne sais quoi* aspect of gardening?

JC: I think the main thing is that people just like, there's a reward for just cultivating mother earth. You know, getting your hands in the dirt, and watching something grow. I think that's more important to people than anything. It's just therapeutic, it just makes you feel good to garden.

JL: How does this tie into being rural?

JC: Well, I'm not sure that it does tie into being rural. Probably because space -- people who live in rural areas probably have more space -- but you see it in New York City, gardens on top of the roof and everything. It's still the same thing. You know, you're making something grow -- you're creating something and watching and nurturing it. I think that's... I think rural probably because of space, is the main thing. But gardening happens everywhere.

JL: So it's the master gardener's job to be contacted with all these questions.

JC: Yes, some of the offices have the master gardeners come into the office and answer phone calls. We get hundreds of phone calls.

JL: What do you think the most popular problem is?

JC: Well, it kind of goes in cycles depending on the time of year. When the moles are in the ground, you get a lot of mole questions. When the tomatoes are starting to ripen, you get some disease problems so it just kind of depends on the time of the year, what kind of questions come in. Fall we get the ladybug question.

JL: Oh yeah we get a lot of those up at Kenyon. So hundreds of calls?

JC: Oh yeah. Probably 40 or 50 just this month. And when garden season, when the spring comes, we'll get call after call after call. Hundreds.

JL: So that means everyone gardens?

JC: There are a lot of gardeners -- I don't know if everyone gardens, but there's a lot of gardeners. And we have fact sheets. These are all research-based. So then if someone has a problem with... one on weeds and ground covers, or fertilizing shrubs, caring for ornamentals... any question.

JL: So if people have questions, they should call into...

JC: They should call the Extension office and we can send them a sheet... what they are is they take somebody's research and kind of boils it down... and this is just about crab-apples so it tells the different kinds of flowers and fruits. We have hundreds and hundreds... and these are all available online.

JL: Oh, ok -- at Ohioline.

JC: And it gets into diseases, the disease cycle and different ways of controlling it, both chemically and biologically.

JL: So what is your background in research?

JC: I've lived in Knox County all my life -- I had a hardware store in Fredericktown for 25 years and been an avid gardener since I helped grandma and grandpa, you know. I guess when I was

growing up I always wanted to farm, y=know I just loved that...

[interrupted by a phone call]

JC: And that=s another thing -- if somebody does have an insect or a disease that we can=t identify, we can always send it into Columbus over at the University for I.D..

JL: What a wonderful resource.

JC: The Extension just has tons and tons and tons of stuff. Y=know we do all sorts of...

JL: Publications.

JC: Yeah, here=s a bunch of vegetable diseases.

JL: Oh my gosh.

JC: Problems in growing vegetables. It=s not always such an easy thing to do.

JL: Yeah, that=s what it looks like.

JC: So, we have lots of resources here.

JL: You can go to a garden club or you can go here... what do you think is the difference between information you can get at a garden club as compared to what you can find here? Do think it=s more technical?

JC: I think our information is researched-based. Y=know a lot times you go to garden clubs or you talk to your neighbor and you get a lot of home remedies. Like the moles - put juicy fruit down - just tons... yeah, and get rid of moles. Our information is researched-based. It comes from Ohio State University, studied in the scientific method -- and then they produce the results.

JL: What a wonderful fact sheets - they=ve thought of everything.

JC: Yeah, it=s neat. All sorts of insects. Like I say, Ohioline, go on Ohioline sometime.

JL: I will. Great. But we were talking about you growing up and you as a gardener.

JC: Ok, so I had a hardware store for 25 years. Always gardened. Went through the master gardener program here in 1990, they were doing it as a trial year. I went through that program and just couldn=t get enough so I went back to Ohio State, while I had the hardware store, and got a degree in horticulture. Then sold my hardware store... and I=m playing with plants now.

JL: So you really got the gardening bug - got bit bad.

JC: Oh yeah I got bit bad. This is my hobby.

JL: So, this is a silly question, but what=s the difference between horticulture and gardening?

JC: They=re the same.

JL: They=re the same thing. Ok.

JC: Gardening is a part -- horticulture is just dealing with plants. And gardeners have plants so... it=s the same thing. [mumbled] Takes care of the nurseries and growing the landscapes and stuff like that.

JL: Now I=ve heard a little bit about horticultural therapy and community gardens, now can you speak to either of those things?

JC: Yeah, I worked at the Extension in Richland County for 3 years before coming here. And we had a community garden up there where we went into a particular area and the neighbors, just a little gardening group -- I think the biggest thing is for the therapy part of it. People just like to get together and they talk and garden and... it=s kind of neat.

JL: It=s a social thing.

JC: It=s a social thing too, exactly. They=ve done a lot of that stuff up in Cuyahoga County.

JL: Yeah, I=ve read that.

JC: Have you read that? Dennis Reinhart up there, he=s very big into that.

JL: So why doesn't Knox County have a community garden? I know it has a children's garden.

JC: We have a nice children's garden -- have you been over there?

JL: Not yet.

JC: You've seen it [gives pamphlet] -- excellent, it is.

JL: Let me write down the phone number.

JC: It would be interesting to find out -- I don't know -- I'm sure if somebody called in and wanted to start a community garden I'd go for it. But...

JL: Well maybe after this article runs, you'll get more calls. Now is it mainly flowers?

JC: It's flowers and shrubs, there are some trees in there. I have never seen it in bloom, so I can't wait for spring. We did a lot of gardening with kids up in Richland County -- a junior master gardener program -- so I've been around the state looking at children's garden. This one is classy!

JL: It looks like it. As a hobby, what do you think gardening specifically offers for kids?

JC: I think that the kids, just to learn about growing -- you just don't go to the grocery store and get your food -- someone produces it, it grows and it lives, and it has to be nurtured just like anything else. And I think that's good for kids -- I think they can learn a lot of life skills through gardening.

JL: A lot of life skills like nurturing...

JC: Like nurturing -- and getting along with each other -- we get a whole bunch of kids together and they work on a different project. Just social activity -- and you do math and just... a lot of things.

[closing remarks and end of interview]