Rethinking the Spring Sale

The plant sale will be different in 2011—and that’s a good thing

Build a supermarket in three months, stock it with merchandise in two days, then sell it all in one weekend. Picture that and you’ve got a reasonably accurate idea of what it’s like to run our annual plant sale and fundraiser.

But imagine also loving the planning, the growing of plants, the putting up of tents and signs, the crowds—the whole tradition of that weekend in early spring.

Of those two minds and in a post-sale fog after last May’s sale, we found ourselves asking the hard question: can we keep doing this? The answer was, no. Well, nearly no. Because we didn’t want to abandon the sale completely. And yet we couldn’t deny that the costs and effort of conducting a single big sale have, over the years, consistently outpaced the revenues, and that the net proceeds just aren’t enough to cover the work that goes into it. Other organizations and public gardens reported similar trends and a cessation of their large annual sale events: Frederick Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids, Mich., and the Ann Arbor chapter of the Woman’s National Farm and Garden Association, for example, have ended their large annual sales events.

So we decided to offer a series of smaller, less cost-intensive sales at which members and visitors could buy the plants we grow here (see sidebar) while still taking advantage of their member benefits. And we stretched the sales over the month of May and into early June to give our members and visitors the opportunity to come back every weekend.

Our reasons for the change are pretty straightforward. Apart from the spring sale’s price tag, competition is an issue as well. Today, independent nurseries and big box chains alike offer the perennials and woody plants we’ve always sold. It didn’t make sense any longer to go up against a system that operates on volume, price, and choice.

Finally, timing. The plant sale takes place during the spring, when we’re busy preparing, growing, and maintaining our gardens and lands, which is what we’re all about. And over the last few years we’ve added new installations such as the Gaffield Children’s Garden and the Sue Reichert Trail, and our existing spaces have grown in either size or scope: the Peony Project and the Riverfront in the Arb, not to mention our prairie areas and new installations such as the labyrinth.

I Joined Because of the Plant Sale!

The possibility of member dissatisfaction was one of our biggest concerns in making changes to the plant sale. Many of you joined because of the sale and the spring tradition of coming to the Gardens for your favorite perennials. We’re keenly aware of that and wanted to maintain a sense of continuity while addressing the inevitable structural and strategic changes that occur in every organization.

Another key part of the plant sale is our team of dedicated volunteers. We’ll be recruiting volunteers for the sales and events next spring and all of our events in 2011. And next summer is shaping up to be one of our busiest ever.

Given the tradition and the fun of the spring plant sale, implementing these changes was a difficult step to take—perhaps one of our most difficult—but ultimately one we couldn’t avoid.

We look forward to seeing you next spring! In the meantime, please call or write if you have any questions, concerns, or comments.

What to Expect in 2011

Choose from plants unique to our spaces, including the Peony Garden, Gateway Garden, and Edible Estate

Mother’s Day Sale—May 7-8
Out-of-the-ordinary terrace pots and hanging baskets—perfect for mom—grown and designed by volunteers onsite.

Gateway Annuals Sale—May 14-15
Create your own spectacular garden accented with the same annuals grown in the Gateway Garden at Matthaei.

Kitchen Favorites—May 21-22
A fundraiser for Cultivating Community, featuring heirloom vegetables and herbs.

Peonies Galore—early June, the Arb
A special sale of some of the beautiful varieties of heirloom peonies that grow in the Peony Garden in Nichols Arboretum.

What we won’t have:

Perennials, trees, and shrubs. Check out local nurseries and farmers markets for the highest quality, most eco-friendly perennials, trees, and shrubs.

Native plants. Our native plant vendor, the Native Plant Nursery, is available every week at the Ann Arbor Farmer’s Market.

Clockwise from upper left: The holding tent during the spring 2010 sale; Cultivating Community student volunteers in front of their vegetable seedlings; a sample of the Gateway Garden color palette; the Peony Garden in bloom.