

How to have the Best Garden Tour Ever!

Carolyn Flynn 14 March 2019

1. Ask six members to show their gardens - five are needed to qualify for club ratings & state award monies - plus one, as a back-up. Approach them at this year's tour.
2. Choose a convenient date that complements the gardens on show. Check with club officers about dates. Try to avoid touring gardens, then having a long business meeting. About the date: will it be rain or shine? Or do you want to provide a later rain date? (Try not to do this - it'll lessen anticipation & participation.) Like it or not, depend on changing weather patterns.
3. Recruit your team. Like Flower Shows, the best garden tours involve most club members (that's another thing noted in award applications), both in helping with marketing, photography, hostessing & refreshments And in a majority of members going on the tour. Two co-chairs and a committee (not the members showing their gardens, but helpers) lighten the load.
4. First, Drive to each garden on the tour and look at it. This is really important. Then you can plan the most logical, direct route, and start and finish in one central location. Note directions, and available parking spaces for your caravan of vehicles. This is probably the most important step. After doing this, you'll understand the overall plan, and have information to make your route map and directions, plan where to have a bathroom break, supply water, have refreshments, etc. Also ask if members showing their gardens will need gardening help beforehand. After your drive, you'll be able to sum up a brief garden description for the tour schedule as well.
5. Write the tour schedule. Choose a starting point with restroom facilities. Include chair contact information, the route and individual garden information - the member's contact information, address and garden description. Specify bathroom and food/water breaks at logical places and times. Recruit hostesses to provide refreshments. The members showing their gardens have worked hard for months getting ready. Help them by bringing in refreshments.
6. Develop a rough timeline, including drive time between gardens. Don't rush or push people. It's only polite to let everyone know generally how long the tour will last well beforehand. Generally, allow at least 20-30 minutes for each garden. You'll know when the group's ready to move on to the next stop.
7. Make a legible printed map of the route, marking the stops. Write concise, brief driving instructions. Cite landmarks, not specific 0.03 of a mile distances. Use balloons or signs as additional markers, because perhaps the worst no-no is getting lost!

8. End the tour with refreshments. Save the main refreshment gathering for the 5th garden, or back at your meeting point. If you have it say, at the 3rd garden, what's the impetus to finish seeing the other two?
9. Invite three outside tour evaluators - two Landscape Design active consultants, plus a Garden Study consultant, or a Flower Show Judge. Ask for help from the garden tour chair, Landscape Design Credentials chair, Garden Study School chair, etc. Complete the garden tour application (online at fgcmo.org website) and send to garden tour chair. For example, most clubs tour gardens in June, so you'll need to invite evaluators and get the tour application in by the end of April. They'll need to know your timeline, written schedule and driving directions to the tour. They are volunteering their time and effort, and it's appropriate to re-imburse them for mileage. These consultants are happy to come and share their knowledge freely. Think of it as free landscaping tips, and a fresh pair of eyes; consultants have put in considerable time to learn design and practical garden solutions, and garden tours allow them to use that knowledge. This is an example of how we learn and benefit from each other, without spending \$75. - \$150. on an outside landscaper.
10. Meanwhile, keep in touch with the members on tour and support them with crew help, plant id, etc. Sometimes, when your garden's on tour, it encourages you to finish a project before the tour. Most clubs settle on a tour date by early fall for the following summer, so it's in the club yearbook. Of course, life changes, so be flexible.
11. A month before the tour, share save-the-date information, and invite your local press, and/or community partners/sponsors. A week or two Before the tour, deliver tour signs to each member on tour. Ask 2-3 people to take photographs of the tour.

12. On the day of the tour!

Meet-up point. Most clubs carpool. Introduce your evaluator guests, give out the schedule and printed map with written driving directions. Tour chairs drive the evaluators and introduce them to each garden owner. It's polite to give them name tags.

Tour chairs lead and bring up the carpool.

Members on tour know when to expect everyone. Ask them to welcome everyone and share their gardens' features and lay-out. Provide name tags for them.

At the 5th garden, or main refreshment site, feed guest evaluators 1st so they can finish their paperwork timely. Invite them afterward to comment on each garden toured. Sharing their constructive knowledge - free - benefits everyone.

13. After the Tour - follow-up

Photographs and written articles in local media boost your club. Invite local press to the tour, or provide them with an article and photographs. Submit

to the Garden Forum. Consider privacy and get consent before sharing on Facebook. Do write thank-you notes. Collect tour signs, and store. Meet with your committee, plan your award application, ask everyone for photographs.

14. Planning - Keeping it Simple.

Paperwork. Printing the schedule is easily done using a tri-fold, double-sided one piece of 8 x 11" paper. Print your route map and written driving directions on another piece of paper. Double-check both by asking another person to proof-read the information. Double-check phone numbers and addresses.

Consider changing up the tour date to the spring or fall if returning to similar gardens.

Garden tours are so much fun! State chairs exist to help you, so ask questions. Encourage your new members to show their gardens. We know that our gardens are not perfection, and are always changing and works in progress. Celebrating our members' efforts is worth everyone's time to make annual garden tours a joy and delight.