

Plant Pot Recycling in the Greater Seattle Area

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In 1991, the Association for Women in Landscaping (AWL) initiated the "Recycling Committee" representing 850 members from four professional groups of the Green Industry: AWL, Washington Association of Landscape Professionals (WALP), Flower Growers of Puget Sound (FGPS), and the Washington State Nursery and Landscape Association (WSNLA). We pursued two ideas:

1) We collected and published information about professionals who were interested in getting rid of plant containers and those professionals who were interested in re-using containers. We call this network the "Plant Container Exchange Directory"; it lists phone number, business name, and respective pot sizes and quantities, for free, deliverable etc.

2) We involved the public in pot recycling by setting up the "Plant Pot Drop Spot Event". We knew that some retailers were already offering a drop-off service for pots to their customers, but usually on a limited scale. Problems are limited space, trashy appearance of that corner of the garden center, and the unpredictable quantities and quality of returned pots.

SET-UP

Several local garden centers participate on a set Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Local growers volunteer to sort pots and subsequently take home as many free pots as they can use for their plant production. Also four to eight more volunteers are needed per station to help accept pots, sort, load, and later clean up the site.

The first event happened in September 1992, with about 450 people who returned pots to three garden centers, and about 6 to 8 tons of pots being re-used. In June 1993, a repeat event with 10 garden centers saw 1650 people bring in pots and more than 12 tons of containers being re-used by local growers. The events were funded in part by a grant from the City of Seattle Solid Waste Utility for Waste Reduction and in part by the four organizing professional groups mentioned above.

PROBLEMS

1) Overabundance of different pot sizes, pot colors, materials. We received pots from Denmark, Holland, Alabama, Tennessee, and the East Coast. There were 350 different kinds of pots which slows down the sorting process tremendously!

2) Some returned pots are over 30 years old! The consumer does not throw plastic pots away easily. UV break-down makes those pots too brittle for recycling or re-use.

3) Nursery pots are too dirty for grinding and remelting into plastic granules and the washing and sorting process is costly. Even one grain of sand in plastic resin can destroy a \$100,000 injection mold!

4) Local growers only re-use 1-gal and larger pots and plastic flats. Two kinds of 4-in. pots are sometimes re-used but with about 25 different kinds of what every manufacturer calls 4 in., the sorting is hardly worth the end result of two kinds of wanted 4-in. pots.

THE FUTURE:

1) The public needs to be educated as to which pots are easier to re-use than others, such as flimsy sixpacks and sturdy 1 gal. The public will eventually turn to using only locally re-usable pots.

2) The "Third Plant Pot Drop Spot" is scheduled for 9 October 1993, in the Greater Seattle area. It will be funded and organized by the WSNLA and AWL, all on a volunteer basis. Next year, a fourth event is intended for mid to late September, 1994.

3) Maybe a local pot pick-up service for the garden centers can be started. The collector will set up collection bins for specific container sizes at these garden centers, pick up pots monthly or so, and sell used pots to local growers, sorted and maybe washed.