

Weed Dating: Singles Meet Over Weeds

By Dee George, Contributing Editor

At first glance, throwing a "Weed Dating" event appears to be a sneaky way to get gardens weeded for free. The trend sweeping across the country is a gardening spin on "Speed Dating" where singles gather and spend a few minutes with one person before moving on to the next person. Promoters like to have fun with the Weed Dating concept by saying: Get down and dirty and start out in bed (garden bed).

But it's really a wholesome event for people who aren't interested in the bar scene and curious about trying something new, says Molly Rockamann, Founding Director of EarthDance Farms in Ferguson, Mo. She learned about weed dating from other farms on the East Coast and decided to try it last year.

"We thought it would be a fun way to get people to the farm who may not be interested in coming out for a normal volunteer day," she says. EarthDance is a nonprofit that preserves the historic Mueller 14-acre farm in the midst of an urban area that has been organic since the 1800's. It offers apprenticeships, classes, sells produce through CSA's and farmer's markets and offers a variety of programs for the public.

EarthDance staff put out flyers and promoted the first Weed Dating event for June. Rockamann was pleased when 80 people preregistered, but Mother Nature knocked out the electricity when the area was slammed with a tornado the day before.

EarthDance postponed the event a day and still about 30 people attended. The farm hosted two more events in 2013 with 30 to 40 people in attendance each time.

"Don't plan this if free weeding is your only reason," she warns, because planning takes a lot of time. Her goal was to create a fun social event and to get people to learn about the farm. Also, the event takes more than one person to pull off successfully. Three EarthDance staff were present to run each weed dating event: Rockamann, Volunteer Coordinator Matt Lebon, and Marketing Coordinator Esther Kim.

"At least half had no gardening experience," she says. "So my advice is not to have people weed things that aren't obvious. For example, a weedy patch with small carrots is not ideal for first-time weed pullers."

EarthDance staff organized participants by age groups, as Kim indicated on their name tags with icons of different gardening symbols. All the pitchforks, for example, were similar in age and weeded one section of the garden. Every five minutes, Lebon rang a cowbell and participants moved to talk to a new person in their group. The last turn was a "wild card" for people to talk to anyone they wanted.

The weeding part of the event only lasted an hour. Rockamann also included a farm tour before weeding and a BYOB happy hour afterward for people to socialize.

"Some people already had partners and



Photo courtesy, Esther Kim

"Weed Dating" is a wholesome event for single people who aren't interested in the bar scene and are curious about trying something new.

some came more than once. They came to socialize and meet new people," she says.

Once she figured out the logistics for the first event, it took less time to plan and she expects to hold more Weed Dating in the future. Rockamann isn't aware of any love connections that have been made yet, but several exchanges of contact information were observed.

"Plus," she notes, "just like farming, finding the right match can take time."

For people thinking about organizing a similar event, she suggests starting small if you are not used to having a lot of people at

your farm. But she recommends targeting at least 16 attendees to make it worthwhile.

She adds that the EarthDance Weed Dating events are free, though she knows some hosts charge a fee.

She is pleased with the results. Some weeds did get pulled, but more importantly she introduced potential customers and program participants to the farm in a fun new way.

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World's Biggest Bird Feeder

When William Greene fills his bird feeder, it's not that much different from feeding cattle or other livestock. His "Guinness Book of World Records Largest Bird Feeder" holds 730 lbs. of black oil sunflower seed.

He lowers the gigantic feeder to the ground via a chain hoist, removes two side panels and the floors of the top compartment and pours in 40-lb. bags of seed. Then he replaces the second story floors and adds more seed, replaces the sides and pulls the feeder back up with the chain hoist.

"The feeder hangs between two stout trees on a 3/8-in. steel cable," Greene says. "It's about 7 ft. above the ground to keep it away from bears. It's not squirrel proof, although round wood baffles on the cable at each end make it more difficult for the squirrels to jump to the feeder."

The science teacher decided to break the bird feeder record when he recognized the interest his students and friends had in watching birds at his feeders near Keister, W. Va., along the Greenbrier River. He figured he could easily surpass the world record feeder in England that held 230 lbs.

With help from carpenter and amateur birder, Chris Ide, he designed and built the feeder out of 3/4-in. plywood with sheet metal ports to discourage chewing by squirrels. The floors with 45-degree inclines help seed flow to the 40 feeder ports from eight feeder compartments. Occasionally, Greene hits the feeder bottom with a sledge hammer to shake down the seed.

The bird feeder is a popular attraction near Greene's cabin. With stained glass accents in the peak it's attractive, and, of course, it's loaded with birds. It's not uncommon to have more than 100 finches, eating, on the ground or perched in nearby bushes. While finches sometimes chase each other away from the feeding ports, most bird species mix easily and Greene has seen close to a couple dozen species from indigo buntings to chickadees to cardinals.

Within a couple of months of hanging the feeder he had gone through more than 200



Seed flows from 8 different compartments to a total of 40 feeding ports.

lbs. of seed. By the end of 2013, Greene had spent about \$200 on seed.

"The best thing about the feeder is the interest it has generated in people—young and old—in birds, bird watching, nature studies, etc.," Greene says.

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This "Guinness Book of World Records Largest Bird Feeder" holds 730 lbs. of black oil sunflower seed. A chain hoist is used to lower the gigantic feeder to the ground, where it can be filled with 40-lb. bags of seed.

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