

Spring Garden Fair & Plant Sale Is Ithaca's Annual Harbinger of Spring

As you read these words, local gardeners already are poring over seed catalogs and planning their flower and vegetable gardens for next spring. An event that is certain to be on each of their calendars is the annual Spring Garden Fair and Plant Sale, organized since 1982 by Master Gardener volunteers from Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County.

The 2008 Fair was held on May 17 at Ithaca High School and drew a crowd of over 3,200 area gardeners who spent almost \$55,000 during the 4-hour event. A wide variety of vendors were on hand to meet every conceivable gardening need. A total of 52 local businesses and community groups participated, offering specialty plants and gardening advice on topics ranging from growing rock garden plants to selecting native species for the garden. Plants for sale included organically grown and heirloom vegetable transplants, colorful annuals, fragrant herbs, hanging baskets, small flowering shrubs, hardy roses, fruit crops, evergreens, and specialty perennials.

The event benefits large and small horticultural producers alike. Reenie Baker Sandsted of Baker's Acres in North Lansing says, "The Plant Sale represents all plant growers in the County and it draws real plant enthusiasts from all over. We always have a great time participating, it's lots of fun and financially successful." It also provides Sandsted with an opportunity to market Baker's Acres. "The Plant Sale not only gets our name out to the public," she says, "But often a customer will ask for something specific that we haven't brought with us but have at the farm, so customers will come to Baker's Acres to get it."

Smaller producers agree. Alan Teeter of A.J. Teeter Farm in Enfield says, "We love the Plant Sale. People come back year after year asking for specific varieties they've bought from us in the past. Growing vegetable seedlings is a small part of what we do on our farm, but it gets the spring started and puts a little income in our pockets for early season farm expenses."

Master Gardener volunteers offered a large selection of perennials for sale from daylilies to Solomon's Seal, and provided free soil pH testing and garden advice. Their plant sales for the day totaled \$6,443 – enough to cover operating expenses for the Master Gardener program for the year. Funds raised from a plant raffle support the teaching and demonstration gardens at CCE-Tompkins' education center.

In addition to the Master Gardeners, 14 other community groups participated in the sale to raise funds or create awareness of their programs. These included members of the Finger Lakes Beekeepers, Auraca Herbarists, the Finger Lakes Native Plant Society, several smaller garden clubs, and the Adirondack Chapter of the Rock Garden Society. Tompkins County Solid Waste and the CCE-Tompkins Master Composter Program offered demonstrations and information on how to turn yard waste into usable compost for the garden. The Ithaca Children's Garden offered a free hands-on children's activity, while members of the 4-H Cultural Exchange club and another youth group sold refreshments. Four other youth groups sold plants and garden-related items. Funds raised by these non-profit groups totaled \$5000 and will be used to support school field trips, bringing in speakers for public events, and other programs. ☀



Scenes from 2008 Plant Sale