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HORTICULTURE AT ZOOS

URBAN AGRICULTURE

CALIFORNIA BOTANIC GARDEN

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

OUR BEST PLANT SALE EVER

Sarah Rummery



Top photo: For a second sale in the fall after some COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, Reiman Gardens' volunteers organize plant sale orders and prepare for the contactless pickup in the parking lot.

Bottom photo: Reiman Gardens' staff and volunteers load a plant sale order into a customer's vehicle during the contactless fall plant sale pickup.

Photos: Amy Huff, Reiman Gardens.

Blazing a new trail can be scary, but it can also be exciting. That's how we at Reiman Gardens felt venturing into an online plant sale. Buying plants is a multi-sensory experience: we like to touch them, smell them, see them, maybe even taste them. So the thought of selling plants sight-unseen made us a bit nervous.

Our annual Plant Sale Extravaganza, each Mother's Day weekend, is a partnership event with our local Master Gardeners and three university student clubs. This COVID-19 year, on April 3, we made the heartbreaking decision to cancel the in-person event, despite having already invested in the plants growing in our greenhouses and confirmed deliveries from partner growers.

During the next two weeks we researched existing online plant sale methods and our system's capabilities. We worked out realistic logistics considering staff time, no volunteer help, and COVID-19 safety guidelines.

We settled on a previously approved e-commerce platform, ecwid (www.ecwid.com), compatible with our point-of-sale system. This platform gave us a quality online storefront, flexibility to customize pick-up protocols, and a back-end system that's easy for first-time users—all of whom are plant people, not tech people.

After populating the inventory and setting automatic communication parameters, we "opened" our (still secret) online store to our staff. This gave us time to find and fix bugs in our system before going live to members on May 4 and the public on May 9.

The e-commerce platform allowed us to build in a thirty-six-hour grace period between paying and pickup, with daily pickups starting at noon. This ensured that there would be no surprise orders from "night owl" shoppers. Each morning, the greenhouse staff printed the confirmations, then picked and organized the day's orders into black bulb crates. Landscape staff printed the order list (organized by pickup time) then retrieved the bulb-crated orders and placed them in the parking lot, making sure to distance orders scheduled for the same pickup time. Shoppers were directed to arrive at their selected time with their last name printed on paper and clearly visible from the car window. Staff then directed each shopper to the appropriate parking stall.

Our planning paid off and the sale and pickup went very smoothly, despite a few snags, such as the e-commerce site over-selling some inventory and people forgetting to pick up their plants. And we had great weather! The pickup process was enjoyable, as it gave garden staff an opportunity to see the familiar faces of members, volunteers, and frequent guests.

The online nature of the plant sale, combined with the gardens being closed to visitors (freeing some staff time), allowed us to stretch our sale into a two-and-a-half week event, instead of three days. More time, more orders, more money. This extended effort earned us an additional \$5,000, making it our "best plant sale ever!" ❁

Sarah Rummery is the manager of horticulture at Iowa State University's Reiman Gardens. She is a graduate of ISU with a degree in Horticulture and has been with Reiman Gardens for 15 years. She works passionately towards making Reiman Gardens one of the country's premier university gardens. Personally, she enjoys gardening and getting dirty with her children, traveling and sampling new micro-brews with her husband, and cheering on the Cyclones.