

# Increasing Production Efficiency Of an Extension Radio Program

by Diane Relf and Mary Frank

*Restrictions on time and money available for The Virginia Gardener radio program forced a re-evaluation of standard weekly or monthly production procedures. By changing to an annual system and using existing resources more efficiently, the program has become easier to produce and fits into station schedules more readily. The use of many guests has made it more interesting and diverse, and it is now widely used by Extension agents as well as radio stations. It is sent to 58 stations, which broadcast it an average of twice each week.*

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In Virginia, approximately 70 agents report the use of local radio programs as a part of their education programs. The programs are generally recorded on a weekly basis, though some are live. This approach to radio programs for a county or city office ensures timeliness of information and flexibility to address significant happenings such as an outbreak of insects or a severe rainstorm. A similar approach is utilized in some states for radio programs produced by university Extension specialists for distribution to radio stations throughout the state.

For many years the Virginia Tech consumer horticulture specialist made a weekly trek to the [university's] radio studios. However, time constraints and a reduction in funds demanded a review of the procedures. While other studies have focused on reducing distribution costs (Brooks, 1988; Powell, 1983), our most serious concern was reducing the amount of time needed to produce the program. It was obvious that we could reduce our distribution costs by sending four programs in one monthly mailing rather than weekly mailings. In addition, we found that radio stations would prefer to get all the tapes for the month at once because it aids them in scheduling. But to allow timely shipping of the tapes, it was necessary to record at least one month in advance of the shipping date. This further demanded a change in the current production methods, as well as raising concerns about broadcast timeliness.

## Timeliness

An analysis of program content was brought on by the new demands for efficiency. This led to the recognition that, for statewide distribution in

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Virginia, timeliness of recording is irrelevant. The state crosses three cultural zones and has a growing season of 190 to 290 days depending on the region. Geographic variation from mountains to beaches ensures that neither weather nor new pest problems are uniform throughout the state. To meet the needs of an audience in such diverse settings, programs need to be timely to the season but not to the particular week. In light of this, we decided to change to monthly recording sessions.

For several years the consumer horticulture specialist was interviewed by an Extension radio producer on a monthly basis. The producer then edited the tapes for distribution. This method of production required that written material and questions be prepared for use by the producer to ensure an interesting dialog. It also meant that the same expert was on 90% of the 60 programs recorded and distributed annually. After three years of using this method, we were forced to take a renewed look at the most effective method of getting the widest diversity of expert information to the radio audience with the least demand on personnel. Though acceptance of the format was high, analysis of radio station preferences indicated that three-minute programs with an interview format was desired.

### Annual Format

We decided to implement an interview format between the consumer horticulture specialist and appropriate experts throughout the College of Agriculture. To maximize the experts' time, they were asked to present enough information for five or six programs during a one-hour interview session once a year. These various programs were to be used at appropriate times throughout the seasons. To merge the interviews of 12 to 14 experts, we developed a calendar based on the subjects each guest planned to discuss and adjusted the topics to ensure that five programs were prepared for each month.

The recordings require approximately 12 hours of studio time and take place during one week in the latter part of October. Table 1 gives a comparison of the approximate amount of time needed from the consumer horticulture specialist, the expert guests, and the studio personnel for recording a year's worth of programs.

**Table 1: Comparison of hours required annually to record *The Virginia Gardener* radio program.**

	Consumer Horticulture Specialist	Guest	Radio Producer	Total
Weekly sessions	52	0	52	104
Monthly sessions	36	0	36	72
Annual session	12	12	12	36

In addition to recording time, approximately four hours are required from the consumer horticulture specialist to make a list of topics, solicit interviews, and prepare a calendar of programs. The radio producer spends approximately the same amount of production time each month (editing the interviews and producing a finished program, complete with a musical open and close) as was spent with the weekly or monthly format.

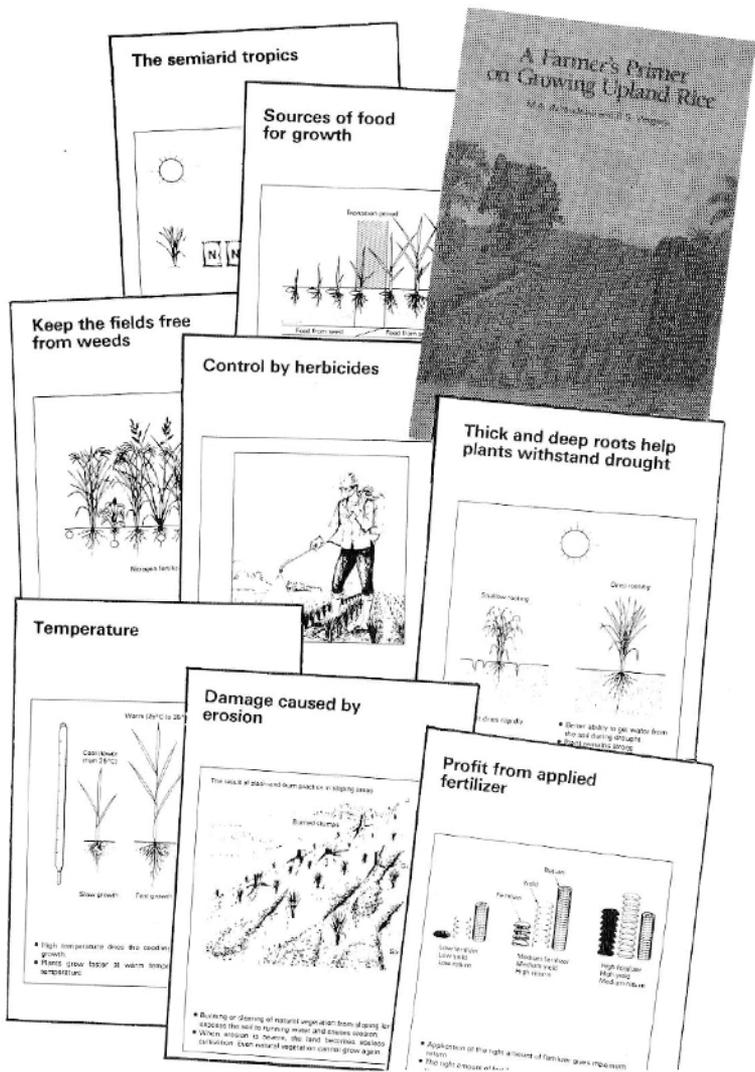
The radio producer has noted several additional benefits to the method. Having the year's worth of topics completed gives her control over production time in case other major projects arise. It also allows her to use portions of the recorded interviews in other types of programming during the year, and has saved her several hours of time each month in arranging and preparing for the interviews.

### **Acceptance of New Format**

A short survey of radio stations was conducted after two years of usage in this format. Stations were asked to provide information on the number of times each week the program was used, the days and hours the program was used, and the estimated audience at the times of broadcast. Other questions not related to efficiency/acceptance sought information on commercial value of program time and the use of garden-related ads before or after the program. The survey also provided space for additional comments.

The results of the survey indicate that radio stations use the program an average of twice each week, with an estimated total audience of 1,600,000. Usually, the program is broadcast between noon and 1:00 p.m., but several stations use it in the early morning hours. All comments were favorable, ranging from a simple "Thanks!" to a request for a 15-minute weekly program.

Under the new format, the number of stations using the program increased from 35 to 58 in the first two years. The increase was due partially to the format change, but also was affected by increased promotional efforts. Extension agents also have increased their use of the program. *The Virginia Gardener* is now the most widely distributed of the regular Virginia Tech radio programs. It is seen as an effective method of reminding a wide spectrum of state citizens that Virginia Tech and the Extension Service are reliable sources of useful horticultural information.



Outstanding Professional Skill Award in the Graphics Category of ACE's 1989 Critique and Awards was awarded "A Farmer's Primer on Growing Upland Rice", published by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and French Institute for Tropical Food Crops Research, located in Los Baños, Launa, Philippines.

The 284-page entry was submitted by ACE members Ramiro Cabrera, designer, and Stephen J. Banta, editor. Cover is in four-color, text in one color. Entry was cited for attractiveness, simplicity of design and communication effectiveness. Easily understood line graphics carry the bulk of the message with limited editorial material.