

GROWERTALKS

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America In Bloom Diaries

Megan Weddington

And the winner is...

Batavia community members who participated in the first national beautification campaign, America In Bloom, had reason to be proud of their accomplishments. At the Gala Awards Ceremony, a large screen displayed pictures of the seven cities participating in the 10,000 to 25,000 population category while the judges' comments were read before the winner was announced. The audience of friendly competitors saw Batavia's now well known painted pots, the window boxes along the river walk, a perennial border along the street and a lush lawn in a tree-dotted park. Batavia received a Special Mention for community involvement, one of eight criteria evaluated by the judges.

Alas, when the envelope was opened, the winner was Fair Hope, Alabama. Perhaps they had a slight advantage, though; it turns out that the mayor of Fair Hope actually started the city's beautification program almost 20 years ago when he was hired ... as the city horticulturist.

Learning from each other

Batavia's Mary Ann Monzani was among the representatives from cities across the nation in attendance at the inaugural America In Bloom Awards Ceremony and Educational Symposium, held in Reston, Virginia, a bustling suburb of Washington, D.C., in October. The symposium gave AIB participants a chance to network with other communities and share their experiences from the past year. The receptions were buzzing with questions, such as how to handle plant maintenance, how much city officials should be involved, and how to generate funding. Though the responses were as widespread as the population categories (less than 10,000 to more than 500,000), there was a consensus that every participating community—38, to be exact—found success in their efforts.

2002 America In Bloom Cities

Less than 10,000 Lynden, Washington: Special Mention Floral Displays

Belleville, Michigan: Special Mention Community Involvement

Lapeer, Michigan: Special Mention Heritage Conservation

Silverton, Ohio: Special Mention Community Involvement

Amelia, Ohio: Special Mention Floral Displays

Burton, Ohio: Special Mention Tidiness

Middlefield, Ohio: Special Mention Urban Forestry

Waterloo, New York: Special Mention Environmental Effort

Lewes, Delaware: Special Mention Heritage Conservation

Lavonia, Georgia: Special Mention Heritage Conservation

WINNER: Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Special Mention Landscaped Areas

10,000 - 25,000 University of Massachusetts, Amherst: Special Mention Environmental Effort

Winchester, Massachusetts: Special Mention - Heritage Conservation

Batavia, Illinois: Special Mention Community Involvement

Willoughby, Ohio: Special Mention Community Involvement

Bay Village, Ohio: Special Mention Urban Forestry

River Edge, New Jersey: Special Mention Urban Forestry

WINNER: Fairhope, Alabama: Special Mention Floral Displays

25,001 - 50,000: Glen Ellyn, Illinois: Special Mention Turf & Groundcover Areas

Barberton, Ohio: Special Mention Environmental Effort

Sandusky, Ohio: Special Mention Floral Displays

Annapolis, Maryland: Special Mention Heritage Conservation

Wheat Ridge, Colorado: Special Mention Tidiness

WINNER: Westlake, Ohio: Special Mention Urban Forestry

50,001 - 100,000 Stratford, Connecticut: Special Mention Heritage Conservation

Lee's Summit, Missouri: Special Mention Heritage Conservation

WINNER: Fayetteville, Arkansas: Special Mention Heritage Conservation

100,001 - 300,000 Modesto, California: Special Mention Urban Forestry

Des Moines, Iowa: Special Mention Floral Displays

Akron, Ohio: Special Mention Landscaped Areas

WINNER: Kalamazoo County, Michigan: Special Mention Community Involvement

More than 500,000 Mecklenburg County, North Carolina: Special Mention Urban Forestry

Monroe County, New York: Special Mention Heritage Conservation

WINNER: Chicago, Illinois: Special Mention Floral Displays

Learning from the pros

Of course everyone was eager for the awards ceremony, though in reality, the award is just a motivator. AIB is more than a contest; it offers communities a chance to work together to improve their environment. The Educational Symposium gave participants the opportunity to learn from the experts about the possibilities of public gardening. On hand were various professionals from the plant industry, including Dean Bemis of Goldsmith Seeds, John Gaydos of Proven Winners, Jim Nau of Ball Seed Company and Scott Aker of the National Arboretum. Katy Moss Warner, president of the American Horticultural Society, discussed community management of public gardens, and Cynthia Wilson, former staff assistant for beautification to Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson, presented information about farmland preservation and sound environmental practices.

The talks ranged in topics from ecological landscapes and fundraising ideas to the interaction of plants and people. Mary Ann, an administrative aide for the city of Batavia, admitted that despite her enthusiasm for the program, "the plant talks were over my head." As the city prepares to take a more facilitative role in Batavia's AIB program next year, Mary Ann found the talks about boosting community participation and alternative funding most informative.

Batavia, IL, population category 10,000-25,000

Mary Ann credits Craig Foltos as the visionary of Batavia's AIB endeavor. He laid the groundwork this year by selling

the idea to the people of Batavia. But fortunately he's experienced with the challenge of selling what can't yet be seen. As a local barber, he convinces customers daily to trust his vision for a new "do." The barbershop also provided an ideal place to reach the townspeople. New people were in everyday, and once a few plantings were installed, they had charming examples to inspire ideas. For those skeptical of their green thumbs, other opportunities to participate soon surfaced.

This year 800 residents volunteered their time, talents and energy to beautifying Batavia; next year, Craig's sell of AIB shouldn't be difficult. As mentioned, the city plans to work more closely with the AIB committee to provide organizational leadership. Craig will help facilitate next year's efforts based on his experience from this year and his enthusiasm for plants and people.

Thinking back and looking forward

When we asked Craig if he was satisfied with the result of the awards, he responded, "I didn't care. I wanted a softer feeling around town and an opportunity for the people of Batavia to get to know one another." He may have provided the vision for the town's participation, but Craig prefers to leave the visions of beautification to each group that gets involved. One area he would like to see expanded is school participation. He says excitedly, "There are 3,000 kids in our grade schools; if we can get the kids involved now, they'll be involved 20 years from now."

As has been stated repeatedly, it's not about the award, but friendly competition; and a date for judging helps participants set goals and stay motivated. Mary Ann says next year, the town may sponsor its own beautification contest among participating community groups. In addition to the population category awards, the national program offers special recognition in the subcategories. Community involvement, floral displays, landscapes, trees, environmental awareness, turf and open spaces, heritage and tidiness are all subcategories that easily can be adapted to the local level.

As members of the horticulture industry, we may perceive initially that AIB is foremost about beautification and the promotion of flowers and plants, but in fact, it's just as much about community—building and fostering relationships by working and learning side by side.

Now that GrowerTalks has followed Batavia through its participation in America In Bloom, perhaps you're ready to start planting pride in your community. Your participation can be as simple as a phone call to the local garden club or to the mayor, or as involved as spearheading the committee yourself. For information about how your community can participate in America in Bloom 2003, visit www.americainbloom.org. or call (614) 487-1117.

Megan Weddington is a graduate student at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, and former editorial intern for Ball Publishing.