

American Gourd Society's 2020 Grant Impact on the Idaho Gourd Society (IDGS)

Why did we apply for the grant? As with all the state chapters, COVID-19 had a major impact on IDGS. Most significant was, after February 2020, our inability to gather for monthly in-person membership meetings and local patch meetings. We quickly realized that these gatherings were critically important events for our members and without them it would be difficult to maintain the interest level necessary to keep them engaged. In the Fall of 2020, during membership renewal time, it became painfully evident as to how many of our members had drifted away due to the lack of camaraderie. In an effort to keep membership from waning, our Board of Directors voted to reduce the 2021 membership dues as an incentive to lure members back for another year. That discount, coupled with the number of members who eventually did not renew, accounted for a healthy portion of lost revenue for the chapter. A byproduct of not being able to meet monthly was the loss of our Wheel-Of-Goody's auction. On average, the popularity of that single event raised fifty dollars at every monthly meeting. These two factors were the impetus for our decision to apply for the AGS grant.

Our board realized that it needed to do something to stay in touch with members, so the vice-president was tasked to determine the best virtual meeting application, develop training instructions, and offer personalized sessions for any member requesting it. There were some constraints with getting the right equipment to broadcast our meetings and some members had antiquated computers or lacked video camera capability. Even though there was a hodgepodge of electronics such as laptops, smartphones and tabletop computers, IDGS did manage to have its first virtual meeting with a reasonable turn-out. Over the next two months, attendance picked up, but with easing COVID restrictions IDGS was able to start meeting outdoors in a local park. The most salient lesson learned during the COVID months was the need to create the cohesive element necessary to give gourders the wherewithal to stay in touch with each other, whether in person or via the virtual world.

So, what did we do with the grant money? Our board agreed to use the grant dollars to purchase a video camera recorder with an integrated microphone, a tripod and a 25-foot compatible video cable to allow it to be connected to a large screen television. Not only will it serve to broadcast monthly meetings to those who may not be able to attend in person, it will also be made available as a training aid for any member who wants to teach classes or create content for our website. Finally, this piece of equipment will allow us to create recordings of, or broadcast live events happening at our annual gourd festivals. We firmly believe that this current technology is needed to grow our membership and, in turn, benefit our financial health. Our chapter also believes this investment will serve as a catalyst to introduce the general public to the many interests the Idaho Gourd Society has to offer.

