

★ About America in Bloom ★

America in Bloom connects people to plants at a grassroots level through education and participation. Founded in 2001, America in Bloom was awarded the American Horticultural Society's 2009 Urban Beautification Award. This prestigious award is given to an individual, institution, or company for significant contributions to urban horticulture and the beautification of American cities. AIB was named to the Associations Advance America Honor Roll. We are truly honored to receive these acknowledgements of our efforts.

While the program is holistic, encompassing the many facets that enhance quality of life, America in Bloom cities know that flowers, trees, shrubs, turf, and groundcovers of the right kind in the right place make a visual impact. Our cities know the economic importance of having their main streets landscaped, as they serve as the welcome signs inviting folks to spend time in the city. They know that well-maintained parks are good, not just for a healthy environment, but for healthy citizens. Communities also realize that these efforts are enhanced by attention to tidiness, environment, and heritage preservation.

To do all these things requires the synergy that comes from an engaged and active community, which combines the efforts of municipal and business partners working in cooperation with residents. The phenomenon of the "AIB bug" that infects people who have become involved with the program is palpable. Once citizens experience the true community spirit that results when everyone pitches in to make visible improvements, there is often no turning back. Indeed, a number of city administrations have attempted to cut back on beautification efforts or community enhancements only to face voters' wrath at the next election. Residents come to relish the community as it has been transformed.

Volunteers

Volunteers are the sustaining heartbeat and lifeblood of cities and towns. America in Bloom galvanizes volunteers from all walks of life, providing a frame-

work for enhancing communities. Volunteers come from every demographic, every age group, schools, service groups, Scouts, churches, and business associations, who join in bringing communities together, creating a synergy of positive efforts with the joy of collaboration for permanent improvements.

Mayors have told us time after time that America in Bloom is the best community-building tool they've ever experienced; through participation in the program, all sectors have collaborated for the first time. That's the lasting power of America in Bloom.

Our judges and board of directors are all volunteers. Far more exciting is contemplating the countless volunteer hours donated in each of our participating cities. In Fayetteville, AR, one out of every three residents volunteers. In Bloomington, IN, 438 members of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program donated 81,873 hours at 58 nonprofit organizations. One year, Logan, OH, tracked volunteer hours and tallied more than 100,000 donated hours. That's remarkable for a town with less than 7,000 residents! Imagine the value and power of the combined hours donated in all the cities. Then consider the value of all the in-kind contributions: the hardware stores that donate paint, builders who offer construction materials, newspapers that sponsor garden make-over contests, nurseries that help with civic plantings, people who grow plants for the town in their greenhouses or backyards.

Participation

Through our first ten years, nearly 200 communities from 38 states have participated in our annual awards program; the lives of 22 million people have been touched in some way by America in Bloom. When you add to that the people in neighboring towns, our remarkable reach has touched the lives of millions more Americans.

Several cities have participated year after year and some winners have moved on to international competition. We have come to define our reach by the number

of cities that continue to embrace our program's goals, whether or not they are active participants in any one year.

Symposium and Awards

Each year the symposium and awards are held in a different city. Participants and those who are interested in learning more about America in Bloom and its programs enjoy outstanding presentations from industry experts and meet like-minded people from around the country.

Inspirational educational offerings include seminars, panel discussions, and presentations on each of the criteria and more. Tours showcase excellent accomplishments by the host city and allow participants to experience firsthand examples of successful and innovative city beautification projects. Awards are given to recognize the "best of the best" across all population categories for excellent achievements in each of the eight judging criteria. The symposium ends with a gala dinner during which awards in each population category are announced. Most important, though, is the realization that each participating town is a WINNER, because through their efforts, they have made a visible difference and important improvements in their community.

Information Resources

America in Bloom plays the important role of serving as a resource for all communities. During evaluations, our judges offer consulting services, sharing with towns what they have learned from other communities of like size, using a "best practices" approach. The judges also prepare a report of considerable detail recognizing strengths and offering important suggestions for improvement.

Other resources include free webinars, a blog on the AIB website, a monthly newsletter, a Facebook page, and resource links on the website, and this book! ★



St. Louis, MO. Photos from 2010 symposium and awards.

How AIB Works—A Judge's Perspective

By Katy Moss Warner, AIB Judge and Board Member

America in Bloom (AIB) is a lifelong learning program for communities. As an AIB judge, I have seen firsthand how cities benefit year after year just by being part of the America in Bloom experience, whether they win a big prize or not.

As with ongoing professional training—which we all know is critical to our success—towns and cities must be ever vigilant to new trends, new opportunities, and new information in order to provide the quality of life and economic opportunities expected by their citizens. So how does this lifelong learning program for communities work? Here are the steps.

First: *The Dream.* So often we think that really good things can't happen. But they can. Everyone in a community can rally behind the idea of beautifying their streets, commercial zones, and residential areas. First a community must decide that it wants to work together to realize their dream. America in Bloom provides a framework to help make it happen. Deciding to compete in AIB gets a community excited, proud, and working together for a common cause.

Second: *The Application.* The town applies to be part of the program. Sometimes it is tough to find the application fee. It is often best to engage businesses, civic organizations or private community foundations to help with this seed money assuring them that the community will rally. For the application, it is necessary to pull together general information about your town. Much of this information can be found on the municipal website. However, this is a perfect time to contact your town's leadership and get them engaged in the process.

Third: *The Community Profile.* Whether our communities are large or small, there are so many good things happening. Rarely are all these good things assembled into one document. Rarely are they known by all the citizens in the community. Getting ready for the AIB judges requires communities to assemble a community profile of all the creative, innovative, and compelling programs that make their community unique and great. Cities generally don't do this otherwise. In at least one community, this little book was so impressive that they printed a number of copies and sold it to their citizens as a fundraiser for the America in Bloom contest the next year.

Fourth: *The Judges' Visit.* A unique and important aspect of AIB is that two judges personally visit each city in the competition. These judges are volunteers whose only agenda is to assist the communities they visit. Many recommendations, idea exchanges, and thoughtful discussions happen during these visits. This is what sets America in Bloom apart from other programs—the one-on-one consultation, coaching, and mentoring. This is an extraordinary opportunity for communities to receive helpful advice that is much cheaper and often more useful than a consultant's visit. And each year a community enters the contest, different judges visit with new ideas and insight.

Fifth: *The Judges' Report.* AIB judges use a carefully considered and well-developed metric tool for evaluating your community. This metric of how your community did in each of the eight AIB criteria provides a useful measurement. Few consultants have such a metric. In addition, AIB judges provide written evaluations of what they saw and experienced. For



each community, the judges are obligated to provide useful and practical recommendations for improving or enhancing the towns and cities they visit. There is not an expectation that all these recommendations be followed. Not at all. They are a palette of options to consider.

Sixth: *The AIB Education Symposium.* As judges, we have found that there are many interesting and effective solutions to the challenging issues our communities face. The annual AIB Symposium provides an educational format that brings in nationally recognized speakers who address these challenging issues and offer solutions. And, just as important, the Symposium offers community leaders an opportunity to learn from the judges and from each other.

Seventh: *The AIB Awards.* Held at the same time as the Education Symposium are the Awards Programs. We judges are probably more stressed than any of our cities at the time of the AIB Awards Ceremony... or maybe not! We want OUR cities, OUR towns to WIN! There are many different awards. First there is the prize for the population category. This is the town or city that has accumulated the highest number of points in their population category over all eight criteria. Then there is a prize for each of the eight AIB criteria. Eight awards and for each one the competition is against all towns and cities, all population categories. Then there is the bloom rating. Each town and city is given a bloom rating from 1 to 5 based on their overall accumulated points. In addition, two new awards have been added. The Community Champion award is given each year to someone who has been nominated from their community and is seen as the AIB program's overall exemplary leader. The YouTube video award

is given to the community that presents the best YouTube Video that year. Each of these are big targets and important awards. Each provides incentives to join the AIB program each year to win a new prize. After you have won your population category, each of the eight AIB Criteria awards, AND received an AIB five bloom rating, only then might you want to step out of the program for a year—or maybe not! Another opportunity awaits after a community wins its population category: they have the option to enter the international competition with Communities in Bloom.

Eighth: *Getting Ready for Next Year.* Not everyone can win the prizes, but everyone wins. Because AIB provides a framework for community improvement and offers expert advice from judges who have traveled across America collecting best ideas from some of the most beautiful and enthusiastic towns and cities, each AIB community benefits. You have now developed an organization where citizens work together to improve the quality of life and economic well-being of your community. Whether you won one of the big prizes or not, you go home a winner. And you have so much material in place that competing the next year will be much easier.

I hear from cities that they do not feel they are ready to enter the AIB contest. If you have the dream and can put together an enthusiastic can-do committee, I encourage you to go for it! You can start with what you have—no need to create a huge project to impress the judges. Then plan on using this framework to keep your community in a process of lifelong learning, improving and growing. As an AIB judge, I look forward to visiting YOUR community. ★

